



SECRETS OF THE

SILENT



WITCH

III

Matsuri Isora

Illustration by
Nanna Fujimi





The Starseer Witch

MARY HARVEY

One of the Seven Sages and a witch who can tell the future from the night sky. Her astrological readings are incredibly precise, and she is held in high esteem by the king. Presumed to be the oldest of the Sages, she frequently presides over their meetings, but her exact age is unknown.

SECRETS OF THE
SILENT
WITCH
III



Everett the Mute

was a true genius.

By that point,
everyone knew what
had happened.

Monica was
using magecraft
without chanting.



Monica put up the hood and gave the sewn-on ears a couple of tugs. Slender and tapered at the end, they were a good bit shorter than a rabbit's.

Horse ears?

she wondered.

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SILENT ✧
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Illustration by **Nanna Fujimi**


New York

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SECRETS OF THE SILENT WITCH III

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PROLOGUE

Bernie Jones and Everett the Mute

Bernie Jones was the second son of Count Ambard, a noble renowned in the Kingdom of Ridill.

In aristocratic society, any sons past the first were treated as spare children. And while Bernie's older brother may have been incompetent, he'd still be the one to inherit the family headship.

That, however, was no reason for Bernie to sulk and abandon his studies. If a second son couldn't succeed his father, then he need only make a name for himself in other ways. So Bernie had studied like mad, eventually enrolling in Minerva's, the top institution for up-and-coming mages, at the age of ten.

His goal was to become a high mage—and not just any high mage. He wanted to be one of the Seven Sages, the *greatest* mages in the kingdom. Becoming a Sage would earn him the title of count of magic, equal in rank to a normal count. A count of magic, however, had even more influence; they were said to serve as aides to the king himself. That would put even his older brother to shame.

His ferocious studies bore fruit, and within half a year of his enrollment, his grades stood at the very top of the student body.

I'm not like my brother. I have talent.

Even a second son had ways of moving up in the world. Back then, he never doubted for a moment that one's path in life could be carved out through effort alone.

When Bernie was thirteen, something happened.

He'd just returned to his own classroom after attending a lesson held in a separate room when he noticed a few boys standing in the corner, surrounding someone.

In the middle of their group was a petite female student who had only recently transferred in. Her name was Monica Everett; they'd nicknamed her

Everett the Mute.

She was a plain, boring, gloomy girl who always had her eyes trained on her feet. She almost never spoke in front of other people, and even when called on during class, she'd just mumble, unable to answer. Basically, she was the type to quickly get left behind and drop out.

It seemed like the boys were playing a game to see who could get her to speak. One of them picked up a spider from the windowsill and brought it to Monica's face.

"Hey, someone pry her mouth open!" he called out. "We'll shove this in! That'll make her scream!" Another boy forced Monica's mouth open while the first carried the spider even closer.

Bernie could no longer stand by and watch this happen. He pointed his index finger at the group and uttered a short chant. His spell created a small flame, about the size of a fingernail, which scorched the sleeve of one of the boys harassing Monica.

"Gyah!" the boy cried out in surprise. "That's hot!"

"What's going on?!" exclaimed another. "Who did that?"

"What exactly are you all doing?" asked Bernie coldly.

The boys glared at him, disdain evident on their faces.

"We were just getting to the good part," said one. "Stay out of our way, *honors* kid."

Most students attending Minerva's belonged to the aristocracy. These boys were no exception—they were nobles. The subject of their torture, on the other hand, was a commoner. At this academy, people like her had two choices: obey the nobles or endure their harassment.

Bernie, however, held different beliefs, and they led him to speak coldly to the male students. "Inflicting violence on the weak? You're an embarrassment to the nobility. It's disgraceful."

His scathing words enraged the boys. Bernie snorted at them, then began quick-chanting as he pushed up the rim of his glasses. Arrows of fire rose near

the bullies, surrounding them.

Quick-chanting was a difficult technique said to be a requirement for becoming a high mage. Bernie was the only one in his grade who could do it. What's more, almost none of the students at the school—across all grade levels—was able to perform it without the use of a staff like he could.

As the boys backed away from this overwhelming display, Bernie snickered.

"Do you think you're any match for me?" he taunted. "I have the best practical grades at school, remember?"

The boys swallowed their objections. Bitter looks on their faces, they walked past Bernie and left the classroom.

Bernie snapped his fingers to cancel out his fire arrows, then looked down at Monica, who was sitting on the floor.

"Can you stand?" he asked.

She didn't answer him; instead, she simply looked down at the floor through her disheveled bangs. Her eyes were on the spider the boys had tossed aside a moment ago. Eventually, it scuttled out the window and escaped.

Awkwardly, Monica looked up at Bernie and mumbled, "Um, th-thank you..."

Her speech was stilted, but apparently Everett the Mute wasn't mute after all. Privately surprised, he listened as she went on to say something that caught his attention.

"F-for saving, um, that s-spider."

"Hold on a minute," said Bernie. He hadn't helped the spider—he'd helped Monica. Why did she feel the need to thank him for saving an insect? His eyes narrowed behind his glasses as he stared at the girl.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I hate bugs. I didn't save the spider. I saved *you*."

Monica blinked slowly as her head tilted to the side in puzzlement. For a few moments, she seemed lost in thought, searching for the right words until eventually she began—very carefully—to speak.

"I'm not, er, scared of, um, spiders," she said.

“What?” he asked, baffled.

Monica’s shoulders jolted. She looked down and started playing with her fingers.

The more Bernie looked at her, the more impassive she seemed. Her features were plain and unaffected, and while she’d probably be as charming as anyone else if she smiled, her face stayed still as a stone, save for her slow, occasional blinking.

Monica remained silent and expressionless for a few more moments but eventually began to mumble again, barely moving her lips. “But if the spider had gotten into my mouth, um, I would have felt really bad for it... I’m happy that you, um, saved it before th-that happened.”

“What kind of logic is that?” asked Bernie, scratching his cheek. Then he asked her something that had been on his mind. “And the way you talk is quite awkward. Did you come to this kingdom from somewhere else?”

Monica shook her head back and forth, face still expressionless. Apparently, she wasn’t a foreigner.

“I’m sorry...,” she muttered. “I did, um, practice speaking, but...” She trailed off, then took a big gulp of air before exhaling it again. It sounded like she had somehow forgotten to breathe. “There was a long, um, period of time when... well, I didn’t talk to anyone...so I’m, er, not really good at it...”

She’d gone a long time without talking to anyone. *So she has a reason*, thought Bernie. Judging by how thin she was—far too thin for a thirteen-year-old—and her awful complexion, he could hazard a guess that her circumstances had been less than ideal.

Bernie bent down before her and extended a hand. “Can you stand?”

Monica’s eyes widened as she looked at his outstretched palm. Then, abruptly, she clutched her uniform pocket. “Um, I don’t...I don’t have much, um, money...”

He hadn’t expected that. His mouth twitched.

“I hope you think a little more highly of me than that,” he said. “I am a proud

member of House Ambard. I would never pester you for money.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet.

Even then, she seemed somehow vacant—like a puppet being tugged around by a puppeteer. Bernie brushed off some of the dirt on her uniform, and her eyes widened a little more. The shift in her expression was infinitesimal, but it made him oddly happy to know he’d caused some sort of change.

“You’re really a piece of work, aren’t you?”

“...I’m, um, sorry...”

“Shouldn’t you be saying *thank you* instead?”

Monica’s lips squirmed a little. It was far too minuscule a movement to be considered a smile, but the corners of her mouth had definitely lifted.

“...Thank...you.”

When he heard those words, Bernie felt a faint sense of satisfaction in his heart.

* * *

“Bernie! Bernie, help meee!”

“What is it today?”

“This essay question on our history homework—I don’t understand it at all...,” said Monica, showing him the page in her textbook.

Ever since rescuing her, Bernie had started helping her more frequently, and she’d come to rely on him. After all, she was a helplessly dull, clumsy girl who would trip over nothing, whose hair was constantly a mess, and who was always losing her possessions. There was certainly no shortage of things to help her with.

Although Monica’s grades rivaled Bernie’s in magic formulae and mathematics, her general-education grades were awful—history and linguistics in particular caused her no end of trouble.

“What am I going to do with you?” He sighed as he opened his notebook and began his explanation.

Once he'd finished, Monica muttered, "Bernie, you're amazing."

"This stuff is basic," he replied casually, though he rather liked having Monica look at him with such respect.

Lately, Monica's speech seemed to be growing more fluid and her face more expressive. When she was in trouble, she'd come crying to him, and whenever he taught her something, a little smile like a wildflower would bloom on her face.

This made Bernie feel good about himself. *He'd* brought about this change in her.

"Thanks, Bernie," she said.

"You're welcome."

Little exchanges like these never failed to fill him with pride.

...But the truth was, he knew what was going on. Faintly anyway.

He knew Monica's hair was so messy because her classmates had cut it against her will. He knew she lost things so often because they stole and hid them from her.

Bernie pretended not to see any of it, though, and continued to help her. Unconsciously, perhaps, he *wanted* her to be isolated. For the more isolated she became, the more she would rely on him.

And as long as she relied on him, he could remain the ever-dependable honor student in her eyes.

* * *

As a school for mages-in-training, it stood to reason that Minerva's taught practical magecraft. However, it forbade students from trying it until six months after they had enrolled. When misused or mishandled, a powerful art like magecraft could be disastrous and lead to all sorts of tragedies. Thus, students would study the basics for at least half a year before moving on to practice.

Bernie had been at Minerva's for three years; he could use most intermediate-level spells and even a few higher-level ones. More importantly, though, he was the only one in his grade who had learned quick-chanting.

Because of that, his practical scores were unrivaled.

Monica, on the other hand, was a relatively new student and had only recently begun practicing her fundamentals. Her understanding of magic formulae was incredibly high, and Bernie was convinced that as long as she could control her mana, she would catch up to him in a flash.

But on the first day of practice, Monica stood in front of the lectern and said nothing.

“When will you be starting, hmm?”

“...Ah... Um... Ummm...”

Macragan urged her on, but Monica’s lips only trembled. She looked like she was about to pass out.

Bernie had helped her practice before class. Her formula construction was perfect, and she had a solid grasp of the fundamentals of mana control. There was no way a beginner spell like this was beyond her abilities.

And yet class ended before she managed to chant a single word, much less cast the spell.

As their break began, Bernie approached Monica. “What was all that?!” he demanded. “Your theory was perfect before!”

Monica, on the verge of tears, hunched over and played with her fingers. “B-but there were so many people around, and, um, I’m scared...of talking...”

At last, it dawned on Bernie. While Monica had gotten better at speaking around him, she hardly said a word to anyone else.

“I’m really...really scared of talking...in front of people. I’m scared of them all looking at me the moment I say something... I’m scared of their eyes...”

“At this rate, though, you’ll never be able to use magecraft.”

Monica sniffled and hung her head. She must have been frustrated, too, just like he was. He’d seen up close how seriously she’d devoted herself to her studies.

I wish I could do something for her, he thought—and then a plan began to

form in his head. “I know,” he said. “If you aren’t good at talking in front of people, you just have to reduce your chants.”

“...Huh?”

“I’ll teach you how to do quick-chanting. If you learn it, you’ll only need to speak for half as long. That’ll be easier for you, right?”

Monica’s gaze began to drift, and she fiddled with her fingers some more. “B-but...quick-chanting...is something used by high mages, right? Would I even...be able to do it?”

“I know you can,” he insisted. “Because I know how hard you’ve been studying the basics.”

She was treated like a dunce by her peers, but her understanding of magic formulae was the best he’d ever seen. With her intellect, she should be able to figure out even formulae used by high mages in the blink of an eye. Her talent could rival his own.

“I’m sure you’ll pick up quick-chanting in a flash,” continued Bernie, his tone more impassioned than usual.

Monica flushed. Then she grinned and said, “Okay... I’ll, um, do my best. Eh-heh-heh. You always know what to do, Bernie.”

“Hmph. Of course I do,” he replied, puffing out his chest. “I’m gonna be a Sage one day.”

Monica smiled and nodded. “Yeah. I know you will. You’re amazing, after all.”

Monica’s earnest praise tickled Bernie’s heart.

Bernie had never once doubted he had a bright future ahead of him.

...Not yet anyway.

* * *

“Okay! Next. Monica Everett, please begin.”

It was Monica’s second day of practical magecraft. The other students snickered, saying class would probably end before the dunce could do anything.

Bernie watched the others in anticipation. Everyone was going to be so

surprised when they saw the girl they called a dunce unveil her quick-chanting abilities!

After being made to stand in front of the lectern, Monica's eyes remained fixed on the flame of a candle in front of her. The first task was to blow out the flame with wind magecraft. But even if you couldn't extinguish it, just making it flicker was generally good enough.

She closed her eyes and pointed her finger at the candle's flame. Bernie watched with bated breath for the shortened chant to pass her lips.

But Monica's mouth didn't move.

Had the difficulty of quick-chanting left her more nervous than before? For a moment, he even wondered if she'd fainted standing up—but just then, he heard a whooshing of wind.

The very tip of the candle at the end of Monica's finger popped off, severed by an invisible blade. The flame itself, however, fell to the base of the candlestick holder and continued to burn.

As everyone was trying to figure out what had happened, Monica's eyes cracked open a little, and she pointed at the flame at the base of the holder.

A moment later, about a cup's worth of water formed above the candlestick, wrapping itself around the flame and putting it out. But the display didn't end there—the water remained, a sphere now floating steadily in midair. Without a word, Monica waved her finger, and the sphere became a small snake.

By that point, everyone knew what had happened. Monica was using magecraft *without chanting*.

They were all speechless, their eyes glued to the scene in front of them—to the unprecedented display of uncharmed magecraft, something no one had ever seen before.

And the one who had mastered it was the dunce who could barely speak in front of others—Everett the Mute.

Bernie watched in a daze.

This is absurd. Absurd...

He'd only taught Monica quick-chanting. He'd never seen—never even *heard* of unchanted magecraft.

I didn't teach her anything like that!

All magecraft, right down to beginner spells like one that produced a little bit of wind, required the caster to calculate a formula, then chant to arrange their mana. Without following this process, a spell wouldn't even activate.

Perhaps if someone could instantaneously find the optimal solution to such a complex formula, they'd be able to forgo chanting. But that was just an armchair theory. No mage, at any point in history, had ever possessed such a mind.

But... But she...!

The realization of that armchair theory—a spectacular feat that would leave its mark on history—was happening right before his eyes.

"It's a miracle," someone muttered.

They were right. It *was* a miracle. And the one performing it was a girl who had started learning magecraft a mere six months ago: Everett the Mute—Monica Everett. She was a true genius, beyond what anyone could hope to reach with effort and hard work alone.

As this dawned on Bernie, he was overcome with hopelessness.

He watched Monica, saw everyone's eyes on her, and felt both envy and a dark anger.

If he hadn't been here, she would have been all alone in this class! Without him, she couldn't have done *anything*!

Bernie ground his teeth. He felt betrayed, and behind the lenses of his glasses, jealousy burned in his eyes.

* * *

Monica's environment drastically changed after her ability was revealed. She became a scholarship student and was assigned to Professor Gideon Rutherford's laboratory; the man was the highest authority at Minerva's and had taught several students who had gone on to be selected as Sages. The word

on everyone's lips was that Monica would eventually join their number.

Professor Rutherford began to give her direct, personalized instruction, and Monica effectively ceased to show up in normal classes. Naturally, that meant she had fewer chances to see Bernie, too.

He hadn't spoken a word to her since the day she'd used unchanted magecraft. She'd tried to talk to him several times, but he always ignored her. It was at that point that Bernie's idea of his perfect future started to twist and distort.

Even if he ignored her, he'd still hear of her exploits whether he liked it or not—about her developing a new magic formula, or successfully summoning a Spirit King, or whatever. One of the most popular stories was about how she'd used unchanted magecraft during combat training against the school's biggest problem child and overwhelmed him in a matter of seconds. That incident proved that her incredible talents could be used in battle, as well.

Bernie began training with reckless abandon, trying to somehow close the gap between his abilities and her genius. But as a result, he contracted mana poisoning and had to be sent to the infirmary.

Writhing in pain as the mana ate away at his body, he cursed her. *She'd* caused all his suffering. *She* was the reason things had gone wrong for him. Everything—*everything* was her fault.

If it wasn't for Monica, my life would have been perfect!

* * *

Two years had passed since Monica and Bernie first met. That winter, as Bernie turned fifteen, Monica was selected as one of the Seven Sages.

Minerva's erupted into a frenzy over the appointment of the youngest Sage in history—things were especially lively on the day of her induction ceremony and parade. But to Bernie's ears, all their cheers and admiration were nothing more than deeply irritating noise.

Even as nothing more than a spare son, Bernie had believed that if he mastered magecraft and became a Sage, others would acknowledge him. And he'd never doubted he could do it.

But he hadn't succeeded—Monica had. Bernie hadn't even made it to the qualifying competition.

He could hear voices praising Monica from every corner of the school. Unable to tolerate it, he was in the process of searching for a place away from the crowds when someone called his name from behind.

"Bernie!"

The youthful voice hadn't changed at all in two years. He'd never mistake it. Gritting his teeth, Bernie turned around and saw Monica awkwardly jogging toward him.

As one of the Seven Sages, she was no longer a student of Minerva's. She wore the gorgeous robes embroidered in gold thread that only Sages were permitted to wear. In her hand she held a large decorative staff—again, one that only Sages carried.

She clutched the staff to her chest and fidgeted with her fingers. Her actions were childlike, she was too thin for her age, and her face was youthful and immature. Monica was no different now than when Bernie had known her.

Except she was no longer Everett the Mute. She was one of the Seven Sages—the Silent Witch.

"Bernie, I, um, I've always wanted to, well, thank you—" Her face flushed as she did her best to put her words in the right order.

Bernie coldly cut her off. "Why? To make fun of me?" he asked.

"...Huh?" Monica froze.

Oh, how good it felt. He smiled darkly. He wanted to see her face twist with hurt.

"Thank me?" he continued. "Ha. Are you trying to be sarcastic? You've been looking down on me this whole time, haven't you?"

"Wh-what?" she stammered. "No... No, I haven't. I've always considered you...a close friend..."

"You're *not* my friend."

Monica's eyes widened and began to form tears.

Hurt her more, he thought. Hurt her so badly, she'll never recover. Tear her to pieces. Rip her to shreds!

"You came to see me, all dressed up in your Sage robes? You *are* being sarcastic. Does it make you feel good to think of me as an idiot? To look down on me? I want to know. Tell me, O great and powerful Sage."

Teardrops fell from Monica's eyes, and she began to sob like a child, the tip of her nose flushing red.

Her miserable expression, the sound of her crying—in some small way, it satisfied him.

"Oh? I didn't think Sages were supposed to look so pathetic. You certainly don't *seem* like one. You'd be better off living in a mountain cabin somewhere far away from everyone else."

She fell to her knees on the spot, burying her face in her hands and weeping.

Bernie quickly walked past her, his short blond hair swaying from the motion. He felt a tiny sense of satisfaction as he listened to her miserable crying.

For a while after that, Bernie didn't hear anything about the Silent Witch's exploits. Rumor had it she was leading a hermit's life in a mountain cabin somewhere. She and Bernie would probably never meet again.

...It's better that way, he thought.

That was how Bernie Jones finally regained peace and calm in his heart.

Her uncharted magecraft was unprecedented.

No one had ever seen anything like it.

And the one who achieved it

was a dunce who couldn't even speak properly

in front of others.

SECRETS OF THE
SILENT★
WITCH
III



CHAPTER 1

I Don't Need a Reason

Lana Colette, a second-year student in Serendia Academy's advanced course, was heading to her elective classroom when she spotted her friend Monica from behind.

Monica was wearing riding clothes—and not a skirt meant for riding sidesaddle, either, but culottes designed for straddling the horse. She must have been on her way to horseback-riding class.

Lana was surprised when Monica had chosen horseback riding as an elective, but when she heard she'd be taking the class with Casey—an experienced rider—Lana had privately sighed in relief.

But then Casey had suddenly withdrawn from school.

Lana had heard about the situation only through the grapevine, but apparently, Casey had been urgently called back to her homeland to deal with family affairs. That wasn't an uncommon occurrence at Serendia Academy—one noble girl or another was always leaving school because she suddenly had to get married.

But since Monica had so few friends, Casey's departure must have been an awful shock for her. Monica had been glumly hanging her head ever since the other girl left. She'd even started behaving strangely around Lana. Not even her snapping at Claudia during lunch could break Monica out of her gloom.

Now, too, as she headed away in her riding clothes, Monica's back was hunched and lifeless. Lana trotted up to her and gave her a tap on the shoulder.

"Monica, your jacket's hem is inside out," she said.

"Lana?" responded Monica. "Oh, ah... You're right... Thanks."

With slow motions, she fixed her hemline, then lowered her eyebrows and smiled uncomfortably. Her expression was tenser than usual.

Lana wondered what she should say to a friend who was depressed like this.

She tried to come up with a topic, but all she could think of were the latest fashions and trends, and she knew Monica wasn't interested in any of that stuff.

Something she'd know about..., she thought. *The academy, the festival... Oh, right!* All the girls were excited about one thing in particular right now. Lana's voice bounced as she asked Monica about it.

"Hey, have you decided what dress you're going to wear to the ball after the school festival?"

"Huh?" Monica's mouth hung open a bit, and her eyes widened into a blank expression.

At the very least, Lana had been expecting to hear something like, *I haven't gotten one yet*, but judging by her friend's expression...

"Monica, you do know there's a ball the night of the school festival, right?"

"Yeah," replied Monica. "I saw it on the schedule, but I thought we'd be participating in our regular uniforms..."

Lana was suddenly reminded that her friend was a transfer student. In general, students attended events at Serendia Academy in their uniforms. But for the balls that followed those events, of course, each student would don formal dress of their own choosing. Those held after the school festival and the graduation ceremony were particularly lavish. Everyone would be dressed to the nines.

"U-ummm," stammered Monica, playing with her fingers, "can't I just go in my uniform?"

Lana looked pointedly at her. "Monica, you're part of the student council. You can't do that."

Monica groaned.

The student council members were in charge of the ball. She couldn't sit it out, and if she took part in her school uniform, it would doubtless harm their reputation.

"Do you have any dresses, Monica?" asked Lana.

Monica shook her head without a word.

“Right.” Lana put a hand to her forehead. There were two weeks until the school festival. She doubted her friend could get a dress ready on her own by then.

“I can lend you an old dress of mine if you want,” Lana told her. “The colors and design would be out of fashion now, though.”

“B-but...,” Monica stammered, looking down.

Lana glared at her. “What? You don’t like the idea of wearing a hand-me-down?”

“No! It’s just that, well, I...” Monica’s voice shook, like she was about to cry. Her drooping eyebrows squeezed together, a film of tears covering her round eyes. “You’re always helping me out, and... Well, I haven’t repaid you at all...”

Monica’s head hung lower and lower. Eventually, all Lana could see was the whorl of her hair. She pressed a finger to it.

“I’m not doing this to be repaid, you know.”

“But...”

Monica was always so serious. Apparently, she’d been worried about repayment this whole time. Lana removed her finger and snorted.

“I...I don’t need a reason to do nice things for my friends, do I?!”

She’d tried to be cool as she said it, but her embarrassment caused her to stumble over the words a little. She twirled a clump of hair around her finger to hide it.

Monica slowly brought her face up to look at her friend.

“Lana, you’re so cool...,” she murmured, full of admiration.

Lana sniffed proudly, and Monica gave one of her usual, awkward smiles.

“Um, Lana... Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. We’ll have to tailor the dress a bit, so come to my room the next chance you get. Oh, and by the way, do you have a corset?”

“I’ve never worn one...”

“What?!” exclaimed Lana, her shock robbing her of any semblance of ladylike modesty.

Lana was, at this very moment, wearing a simple corset under her uniform. It was perfectly normal—a basic aspect of grooming—for any girl their age.

But as she studied Monica’s body more closely, she understood why this wasn’t the case for her friend. Monica looked for all the world like she was in her early teens—and not in a *delicate* way but in a *too thin* way. It was even easier to see now that her riding clothes were accentuating her curves—or rather her lack of them.

“Well, I suppose you don’t have any fat to pull in to begin with,” observed Lana.

Monica groaned again.

That said, creating a bit of constriction at the waist and stuffing her chest a little would probably make her look more feminine. Lana decided then and there to send off for the corset she’d used in her early teens.

* * *

The Silent Witch Monica Everett was one of the Seven Sages—the kingdom’s most skilled practitioners of magecraft. She was also extremely shy.

She hated being in front of others and would sometimes even faint from nervousness. Because of that, she had holed up in a mountain cabin, doing nothing but magecraft research and other numbers-related work.

However, her colleague, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller, had recently strong-armed her into a mission to guard the second prince, and Monica had very reluctantly transferred into her target’s school, Serendia Academy.

The academy was an elite school for noble children, and the things they studied—proper etiquette, ballroom dancing, and the like—were completely new territory for Monica, whose talents all lay in magecraft and mathematics. Nevertheless, with some help from her friends, she had already overcome several trials.

Now she was about to face her next challenge: one of her electives—

horseback riding.

“I’m Monica Norton, a second-year student in Serendia Academy’s advanced course. Pleased...to meet you!”

It had been only a month and a half since Monica had transferred into the academy. But she didn’t bite her tongue or stammer. This was the most fluid, energetic self-introduction she’d ever given. She bowed to the horse in front of her.

...That’s right—she’d just introduced herself to a horse.

Obviously, the horse wasn’t going to respond like a human might. It whinnied, its mind clearly somewhere else.

Okay... I’ll do...my best! Monica thought. She’d been down in the dumps lately, but after talking to Lana, she was feeling a tiny bit better. Rallying the little burst of energy her friend had given her, she clambered up onto the horse. Aided by the teacher’s hand, of course—she couldn’t have done it on her own.

Oh... Oh no, I’m... I’m so high up...!

Monica had never had the opportunity to ride a horse before, and the animal’s height exceeded her expectations. She felt her body tense. Though she didn’t have a pathological fear of heights, she still felt more trepidation than excitement at the prospect of being higher up than usual. What if she fell off?

As she froze in the saddle, the teacher, an older instructor who was used to handling horses, spoke to her in a calm voice.

“Try walking the horse around slowly first.”

“O-okay!”

The horse began to walk at a languid pace—about the same speed as a human... But that didn’t matter.

“Eegyaaahhh?!”

Monica shrieked as the slight vibrations caused by the horse walking sent her hurtling to the ground.

Whispered voices came from around her.

“Hey, that girl just fell.”

“That’s Monica Norton from the student council, right?”

“How in the world did she manage to fall off a horse that slow?”

Monica whimpered. Her motor skills were absolutely abysmal. She was clumsy, had awful balance, and tripped over nothing all the time. When it came to horseback riding, that lack of balance was lethal. The shaking of the horse as it walked and the minute slant when it began to turn were all it took to throw her stiff, tense body off its back.

“Owww, that hurts...”

She tried three more times after that, each attempt lasting less than a minute before she fell off. The exasperated looks from those around her stung her as much as the physical pain.

Why can’t I just...do things like everyone else can...? she wondered, biting her lip. In all honesty, she knew why. She couldn’t do the things the rest of them could because in the past, she’d never tried—she’d always run away.

Clenching a fist to revive her shattered enthusiasm, Monica got up and faced the horse again. *I want to learn how to ride a horse. I’m going to learn, and then...*

A girl’s face flashed in her mind. She was smiling, her hair like a horse’s tail. *Then, one day, I’ll be able to...*

“I’m surprised you chose horseback riding,” came a familiar voice from behind her.

Monica froze. Why was he always catching her by surprise like that? She turned around, and just as she’d expected, two gorgeous blue eyes met her own

“Your Highneesss...”

“You’ve improved,” came the reply. “You made it through all two words without stammering.”

Felix Arc Ridill—the kingdom’s second prince and the one Monica was supposed to be protecting—covered his mouth and chuckled.

This took her by surprise. Had the prince chosen horseback riding as an elective? As she stood there in astonishment, he hopped up onto the horse. Not onto the saddle, though, but into an unstable position right behind it.

Then he extended a hand toward her. "Come."

"Huh?"

"It's my job as your senior to guide you, isn't it?"

Monica wanted to avoid the negative attention she'd surely get by allowing Felix to teach her. But more than that, she wanted to improve. She bowed quickly and said, "Th-thank youph," choking on the second word.

She'd managed to introduce herself just fine to the horse before, but she still had problems when it came to people. Disappointed with her lack of progress, she took Felix's hand. He easily pulled her up onto the horse. For how slender he was, he had strong arms.

"Posture is very important when riding," he explained. "Always keep your back straight. Now bring your shoulders back."

"R-right!"

Her fear had been causing her to lean forward when she'd been alone, but she felt better now that someone was behind her, providing support.

"Keep your body loose," continued the prince. "Let your feet dangle naturally. And keep your eyes up, looking into the distance... There you go. Let's try walking a bit."

Felix gave the horse a light nudge in the side with his feet, and it began walking without complaint. When Monica squeezed the reins, the prince put his hands atop hers.

"When you want to tell the horse to do something," he said, "it's not good to rely too much on the reins. If you pull them too hard, it'll hurt the horse."

Now that she thought of it, Monica remembered panicking and yanking on the reins before falling the last few times. She looked down at the horse and lowered her eyebrows. "Did I hurt you earlier...? I'm sorry..."

The horse gave a whinny, though it didn't appear to have understood her.

As Felix watched, he seemed a little surprised. “Are you not scared of horses?”

“Huh? Um, w-well...,” she stammered. “No...I’m not.” She was scared of falling from a high place, but not of the horse itself. To be honest...*people* were scarier.

“Hmm,” Felix hummed in response.

They moved along for a little while without speaking, and eventually Monica saw a rather large stone. It had been placed there on purpose as an obstacle.

Monica’s hands immediately tightened on the reins, and Felix patted them.

“If you want to give the horse an instruction, first, move your legs and your center of gravity. The reins are secondary,” he explained, gently shifting his weight. That was enough to cause the horse to walk cleanly around the obstacle.

To Monica, it felt like the horse was much more subdued than when she’d been riding alone. Maybe it was just her imagination. “He’s...calmer than before,” she remarked.

“Horses are sensitive creatures. When their rider is nervous, they can tell.”

“Oh...”

In other words, Monica’s own mental state had been unsettling the horse before.

“The first thing to learn is how to ride with the proper posture. If you can learn the posture and how to trot, you’ll start improving by leaps and bounds.”

“Trot?”

“When a horse runs, it does so in a one-two rhythm. We call that a trot. You switch between sitting and rising along with the rhythm. It lets you avoid all the shaking, putting less burden on you and making it easier to balance.”

I see, Monica thought. *So horseback riding isn’t just about sitting there and holding the reins. It’s a binary system... Since posture and rhythm are important... I guess it’s kind of like dancing?* She was once again struck by how many things needed to be physically tried in order to be understood. She nodded to herself, fascinated.

“Posture,” Felix whispered into her ear. Monica hastily straightened out her back. Her hunch was habit at this point, so if she stopped thinking, she’d immediately curl up.

“If you lean forward,” explained the prince, “it’s much easier to fall. But if you lean too far backward, it’s difficult to keep your balance. Concentrate on keeping your back straight.”

“Okay!”

Monica recalled what she’d learned in ballroom dancing. *Right, straighten my spine and relax.* Thinking back on all her lessons one by one, she muttered, “Straightening your back, huh...”

“Yes?” prompted the prince.

“It’s useful for a lot of things, isn’t it?”

Felix gave a little smile. “You’re right,” he said. “Actually, I’m surprised you chose this as your elective. Was there a specific reason?”

Monica’s grades in ballroom dancing had been disastrous, so it must have seemed very strange that she’d chosen horseback riding.

In the Kingdom of Ridill, there were certain areas where women rode horses, but city dwellers rarely had the chance. This was especially the case for the daughters of nobles, and there were very few girls in the class.

Monica opened her mouth, then closed it again, trying to put together what she wanted to say. When Casey left the academy, Monica had been conflicted. In truth, it would have been possible for her to submit a request and change her electives right up until the start of classes. But ultimately, she didn’t fill one out, deciding to go through with horseback riding and chess as her two electives.

“I have a friend...who I want to tell one day...that I learned to ride horses.”

Saying this out loud seemed to give her a little burst of energy.

“Would that friend happen to be Lady Casey Grove?” Felix responded gently. “The one with us when we were carrying in the supplies? She did leave school very suddenly, didn’t she?”

Monica’s heart jumped for a moment. The incident when the lumber had

fallen while they were carrying supplies had been Casey's doing. On the surface, the matter had been settled as a simple accident, and Louis had retrieved the magic item she'd planted to assassinate the prince. Felix couldn't have known anything.

But when he said Casey's name, Monica couldn't help feeling shaken. *If anyone finds out Casey was after the prince's life, she'll be executed...*

Perhaps her panic traveled through the reins, because the horse began to step a little more awkwardly.

Felix soothed the horse and said quietly, "You haven't been yourself since that day."

"Ah... I, ummm, is that...so?"

"It is. So I'm relieved to see you take on riding with a positive attitude."

Positive attitude? she wondered. *Those words don't describe me at all.*

Still, if Monica was looking ahead even a little right now...then it was because of all the kind people like Lana who had given her courage and spurred her onward. It was thanks to them that Monica could hold on to the hope of meeting Casey again one day. She imagined herself smiling and proudly telling her friend she'd learned how to ride. That would be her goal.

"It's good to have goals," remarked Felix. "I hope you can hold your head high and tell your friend about this one day."

Although the prince teased her constantly, he never made fun of her. That made her happy, and Monica managed to awkwardly ask him a question, barely moving her lips.

"Yes. Um... Come to think of it...why did you, um, choose this class?"

The second prince was said to be a multitalented genius. She'd heard he was a very skilled rider, and yet he'd still taken this class as an elective. Was there a reason behind it?

"Actually," replied Felix, sounding rather pleased, "this is the one class I always make sure to take every year."

"Every year? Do you like riding?"

“Well, yes, but... Okay, I’ll make an exception and tell you why,” he said mischievously, giving the horse a light kick on its sides. In response, it veered off the basic practice course and headed for the woods—where the advanced course was located.

“S-sir? Uh, um, errr, where are we going?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” he answered, his voice strangely spirited.

* * *

The woods behind the academy were filled with oak trees planted at even intervals, currently in hues of red and yellow. Since this area was designated as a horseback-riding course, it was maintained somewhat to make it easier for horses to traverse.

However, just as Monica began to think they were in for a nice, easy ride through the woods...the horse veered off the course and began proceeding through the trees.

“S-sir!” she wailed. “This isn’t good! We’ve gone off the path!”

“Mm-hmm,” replied Felix. “This is the way to our destination.”

“...Huh?”

As Monica tilted her head in confusion, Felix looked upward. He was wearing his usual gentle smile, but for some reason, the corners of his lips were turned up a little more than usual. He seemed almost *excited*.

“That’s right. Look up there.”

His upturned blue eyes shone in the sunlight filtering through the leaves. Monica followed his gaze and looked up as well.

The clear autumn sky seemed so far away, so high up. But then several figures cut through the scattered clouds—a flock of birds and a boy with dirty-blond hair. It was the ever-energetic Glenn Dudley.

“Gyaaahhh!” he yelled. “Stop, stop, quit it! Stop pecking me already!”

The flock of birds appeared to be chasing him. Monica looked back at Felix. “Um, errr...?”

The prince continued watching Glenn with vague amusement on his face as the boy flitted around in midair. As Monica wondered what to say, the prince broke the silence. “Oh. Looks like he’s going to fall.”

“What?!”

Her eyes went back up to the sky in a panic as Glenn, still being pecked, hurtled toward the ground...before catching himself just in time and coming to a stop in midair before gently floating the rest of the way down. There were several students near the spot where Glenn had landed.

“They’re having practical magecraft class over there,” explained Felix, pointing. “Although Dudley’s about the only one who can use flight magecraft.”

Following the line of his finger with her gaze, Monica understood. The other students were all practicing basic spells.

“Dudley’s incredibly talented,” he continued. “The formula for flight magecraft isn’t that complicated, but it requires precise mana control and an impeccable sense of balance, so even many high mages can’t use it.”

That was exactly the reason Monica couldn’t fly. As one of the Seven Sages, she had a perfect theoretical understanding of the flight magic formula, and she could control her mana properly as well. But sadly, her sense of balance ruined everything—she’d always slam right back down onto the ground—just the same as horseback riding.

But that aside, something about this situation struck Monica as odd. Was it her imagination, or did Felix seem awfully knowledgeable about magecraft? *Everyone knows flight magecraft is difficult*, she thought. *It’s not strange he would, too. But...*

As she was mulling this over, the horse began to *clip-clop* off in another direction. *Where are we going now?* she wondered, when suddenly she felt goose bumps rise up on her skin.

It was like they’d just passed through a thin, invisible film of some sort—the unique sensation you got when you crossed a barrier.

This isn’t just any defensive barrier, either... Wait!

A rush of cold air brushed across her cheek as she brought her head up in surprise. The gust was blowing out from deeper in the woods, chilly as a winter wind. She peered in the direction of the wind and saw two figures in a clearing.

Both were Serendia Academy students, and both were rapidly chanting. One of them was a blond young man. The second, facing him, wore his silvery hair tied back behind his neck—it was the student council’s vice president, Cyril Ashley.

The blond one finished his chant, then held his fingers up toward Cyril. From those fingers leaped a fireball big enough to just barely put your arms around.

Cyril finished his chant at the same time; his spell produced a wall of ice in front of him that blocked the fireball. The flames dissipated, throwing out puffs of steam, but most of the ice remained un-melted.

“That’s...,” murmured Monica.

Felix leaned in toward her and whispered, “And this is where they hold advanced practical magecraft classes. They’re engaged in something called a magic battle—mock combat using only magic, carried out inside a special barrier.”

Magic battles were something Monica was extremely familiar with. After all, they were first developed and used at the greatest mage-training institution in the kingdom—her alma mater, Minerva’s.

As a general rule, in a magic battle, you were permitted to use only attacks imbued with magic, via magecraft or magic items. Inside the barrier, you wouldn’t be hurt even if an attack struck you; instead, it would drain an equivalent amount of mana. The higher the attack spell’s power, the more you lost. Ultimately, the last competitor with mana remaining won the battle.

Back at Minerva’s, there had supposedly been a student who used magecraft alongside physical attacks during these magic battles. That student had employed magecraft to dazzle, then punched and kicked their opponent. This outrageous fighting style had caused a lot of trouble for Minerva’s teachers. In the end, they’d upgraded the barrier to prevent physical attacks from dealing damage.

Thinking about magic battles really takes me back, thought Monica. I had to take part during the qualifiers for the Seven Sages, too...

Inside the barrier, you would never be injured by a spell, no matter how strong it was—but you *would* feel the pain and impact. Monica hated painful, scary things, so she hadn't exactly been excited to join in. She'd had to participate several times as a student at Minerva's, but all she could remember was being terrified and trying to run away until it was over.



As she gazed toward the competitors, a far-off look in her eyes, Cyril finished locking down his opponent's offensive spells.

"He's up against the president of the magic-battle club," remarked Felix. "He's really something."

"Lord Cyril is quite strong," she agreed.

"Right? He's the only one who can use quick-chanting at the academy... Mm, I think he might be the strongest student here."

As she listened to the prince speak, Monica lazily tracked Cyril with her eyes.

It had been around a week since the failed assassination attempt on Felix. The magic item used—Spiralflame—had been retrieved and the culprit, Casey, was forced to leave school under the pretext of a family matter. Everything had been handled behind the scenes.

Unfortunately, however, one part *had* made the record—the incident of the lumber falling as they brought in supplies, which Casey had orchestrated in order to create an alibi. She'd sliced the rope bundling the wood together. But Cyril, who had been there at the time, blamed himself—he believed he hadn't properly checked everything.

Felix never criticized Cyril for it, but Cyril did enough of that by himself. Monica, who had been present at the time, knew he wasn't at fault, but she couldn't insist on it. If they realized the lumber falling had been Casey's doing, the entire assassination plot would unfold like a daisy chain.

Monica hung her head as she remembered the previous week's events. The day it happened, not only had she been unable to tell the truth, she'd been overwhelmed by guilt and broke down bawling in the student council room.

Neither Cyril nor Neil, who had been there at the time, mentioned it the next day. She was thankful but also felt guilty about it.

I wonder if there's something I can do for Lord Cyril..., she mused. He was always helping her out—teaching her how to do her job, doing it for her when she was incapacitated, giving her hot chocolate. And it wasn't just him, either. Her classmate Lana, Neil from the student council, and her coconspirator

Isabelle... They had all been helping her in various ways ever since she'd arrived here.

What could she give back to all those kind people?

Lana had already said she wasn't helping in order to receive something in return—that she didn't need a reason to be kind to her friends. Would Monica ever be strong enough to say something like that to another person?

I...hope so.

Felix tapped her on the shoulder, interrupting her private thoughts.

“This has been a nice little walk, but let's return to the other course now,” he said, turning the horse back the way they'd come. She glanced back at the prince and noticed he seemed in especially good cheer.

“Did you choose horseback-riding class as a way to, um, secretly watch practical magecraft classes?” she asked.

“All part of my studies,” he answered. “By understanding what can be achieved with magecraft, I can more quickly make decisions in emergencies.”

“I, um...I see...?”

He said it was for his studies, but Monica got the feeling that wasn't the only reason. After all, his eyes had been positively glowing as he watched Glenn and Cyril. *But he said he couldn't use magecraft, so—*

“Lady Norton, posture, posture!”

“R-right!”

Her back must have hunched over again while she was thinking. She hurriedly straightened it out.

There were so many things she needed to think about, but she found it difficult to collect her thoughts while getting used to the unfamiliar feeling of sitting on a horse. She consciously fixed her posture, deciding to simply focus on riding for now.



CHAPTER 2

Upstart

At Serendia Academy, students chose two elective classes to participate in each year. Monica had chosen horseback riding for her first and chess for her second. Two days after her riding session, she headed to her chess classroom for the first time.

During the observation day, she'd attempted to play the game without really knowing the rules. But this time, she'd read through an entire textbook on the subject in advance.

As she walked, she reflected on the contents of said book—which she'd stayed up late reading the night before. Just then, she heard a lively voice call to her from behind.

"Hey! Monica!"

When she turned around, sure enough, she saw a tall young man with dirty-blond hair waving to her—Glenn. Next to him was Neil, who was considerably shorter, and his fiancée, the beautiful and tall Claudia. It was a strange group.

Bowing, Monica said, "Hello. Um...are you all taking the same class together?"

"We sure are!" answered Glenn. "We're about to go to fundamental magecraft!"

When she'd seen him the day before, using a flight spell to zoom around the sky, that had been practical magecraft—where students tried out spells for real. Fundamental magecraft, which they were heading to now, was focused on classroom learning. Once a student had completed both classes, they could progress to the advanced practical magecraft course the year after that. The advanced course was what Cyril was taking, and Glenn apparently intended to start it the following year.

"Practical magecraft was so fun," Glenn continued. "We got to use a bunch of spells! But it's a sit-down lecture in fundamentals today... Neil, if I fall asleep, wake me up, will you?"

Neil offered a pained grin. Glenn already seemed sure he'd be napping in class.

Claudia looped her arm through Neil's. "So you've gotten Neil to agree to wake you up if doze off? I see... Not a bad idea at all."

"Um, Lady Claudia," said her fiancé with a troubled expression. "You're not going to fall asleep, are you?"

Claudia simply smiled back—or maybe it was more of a smirk. In any case, it made her look positively wicked.

Meanwhile, Glenn looked with great interest at the textbook clutched in Monica's hands.

"What classes did you end up taking?" he asked.

"I chose horseback riding and chess... Today is, um, chess class."

"Chess, huh? Sounds pretty hard," Glenn said simply.

Neil smiled and cut in. "That brings me back," he said. "Lady Claudia and I took chess last year. Isn't that right?"

"...Yes, we did."

In contrast to Neil's grin, Claudia's expression was clouded. She always had a gloomy, melancholic air about her, but that aura seemed to grow twice as heavy as soon as she heard the word *chess*.

I wonder what happened..., thought Monica, at a loss for how to react. Suddenly, she felt a weight press down on her. This wasn't the weight of Claudia's mood, however, but a physical weight—someone had placed their hand on her shoulder.

With stilted motions, Monica turned around to find a pair of drooping eyes staring down at her. It was one of the student council secretaries, Elliott Howard.

"Hey there, little squirrel," he said. "Time for chess class, right? We're both going, so might as well head there together."

There was an upbeat smile on his face, but Monica was unable to decipher his

true intentions and tensed up.

Elliott was a stickler when it came to social hierarchy. He disliked Monica because she had been chosen as a student council member despite her status as a commoner. When they had previously encountered intruders pretending to be from the Abbott Company, he'd made it very clear the two of them were different—he had responsibilities, and she did not.

That must be how he truly felt about her. And, come to think of it, Monica had barely spoken to the secretary since then; he'd been incredibly busy dealing with the incident's fallout, after all.

She groaned internally. *This is so awkward...*

As she looked down at the book in her arms, she felt the hand on her shoulder grip her a little more tightly.

"We should go," said Elliott gruffly.

"R-rokay!"

Monica bowed to Glenn and the others and started walking after Elliott. He thudded down the hallway without a word, and she needed to jog a little bit to keep up. She chased after him, slightly out of breath.

When they arrived at the classroom, Monica started panicking over where she should sit, and Elliott gestured with his chin toward the window.

"Sit over there. Let's play a game," he said before taking a chessboard off the shelf without waiting for her answer.

Monica sat down as instructed, and Elliott picked up the two king pieces and switched them around in his hands underneath the desk.

When he was done, he held his closed fists out to Monica. "Pick whichever one you want."

"O-okay, then...um...this one," she said, pointing.

He opened the hand she'd indicated to reveal the black king. Elliott would have the first turn as white, while Monica would go after him as black.

As she was clumsily lining up her pieces, Elliott—who had finished his own

side already—propped his chin on his hand and said, “Hey.”

Monica stopped arranging the pieces and looked at him. “Y-yes...? What is it?”

“About the match we played before on observation day,” he murmured, toying with one of his pieces. “I hadn’t told you about castling yet, but I still used it to win... Why didn’t you point that out in front of everyone?”

Monica blinked, not understanding.

She remembered quite well her first game of chess on observation day. Elliott had handicapped himself by removing his own queen and giving Monica the first move. In the beginning, she’d been dominant. But at the very end, Elliott had used a special move called castling, which let him change the positions of his rook and king in a single turn, defeating her. At the time, she hadn’t known about the rule, so in a way, it was only natural she’d lost.

As she struggled to find an answer to Elliott’s question, he continued. “You had the right to criticize me, Lady Norton—to say it wasn’t fair.”

Suddenly, Monica had a realization. Lately, Elliott had been acting a little strange—he’d try to say something to her in the student council room, only to hurriedly move away. Was that all because he’d wanted to talk about this?

“Um, well...,” she began, carefully choosing her words. “Someone I know would have probably said this...” Monica recalled her colleague and fellow Sage, the Barrier Mage Louis Miller. She had a fairly good idea of what he’d have to say about the situation. “...*You were a fool to accept someone’s challenge based only on their own explanation, without even looking up the rules for yourself.*”

Elliott’s jaw dropped. “Who is this person? They sound awful.”

“Well, I actually, um, agree with them, so... And when they taught me a card game, they told me the game had started before we even sat down.”

The secretary heaved a sigh, then raised his hands as if in surrender.

“Okay, okay. Give it a rest. I wasn’t trying to trap you by not teaching you castling. I just thought someone new to the game wouldn’t understand what it was. And I was being cocky. I figured I’d beat you easily without using it anyway.”

“Oh,” said Monica ambiguously.

Elliott made a sour face, then mussed up his own perfectly combed bangs.

“That’s what you’re supposed to be mad about,” he insisted. “I looked down on you, then got mad when I started losing, and used a move I hadn’t taught you in order to steal the win. It wasn’t fair. It was a shameful thing for a noble to do.”

“Ummm... Well...”

This troubled Monica. She had no idea what she should be angry about. She’d never gotten mad at someone for looking down on her. To be quite honest, she had more of a problem with people making too much of her.

She couldn’t think of a reason to blame Elliott for not telling her about castling, either. It was her own fault for not looking up the rules herself. So she fidgeted with her fingers and said quietly, “I’m sorry. I can’t think of a reason to, um, be angry.”

For some reason, that made Elliott’s eyes widen in surprise.

Confused and wondering if she’d said something strange, Monica continued. “I just want to be able to, um, play chess, so...” She finished arranging her remaining pieces and looked at Elliott. “Shall we, um, start?”

All expression dropped away from her face. The hesitation and indecisiveness that always plagued her youthful features gave way to a quiet gaze like still water as she waited for Elliott to make the first move.

He released a long breath, then put his hand on a white pawn. “Then I’m not going to pull any punches. I’ll try my best to win.”

“That would, um, make me happy.”

“Heh, big talk! Just don’t start crying when I beat you, little squirrel,” said Elliott before moving the piece. He seemed oddly enthusiastic.

* * *

When Elliott Howard, eldest son of Count Dasvy, was six, his father had taken him to visit Duke Clockford for the first time. That was when he’d met Felix Arc Ridill, the duke’s grandson and the second prince of the kingdom. The same age

as Elliott, Felix was a frail boy who had apparently been recuperating away from the castle at his grandfather's home. Elliott's father had brought him here to play with the prince.

But Elliott had *hated* Felix.

The boy was clumsy and had terrible motor skills. He was so weak he couldn't even lift a training sword properly, and without a servant sitting behind him, he could barely ride a horse. His dancing was awful as well. He was slow to learn, so his grades were low. He was dull and stupid—he couldn't do *anything* right.

To top it all off, Felix was terribly shy. He couldn't say two words in front of someone else—he'd choke on them and look at his feet. He could barely even say hello.

In fact, the servant boy who was always with him spoke and acted much bolder than the prince. Elliott had sympathized with him—it must have been difficult, having a useless brat for a master.

Felix was just so incompetent. When Elliott thought about the possibility the boy would eventually outrank all of them, it made him helplessly angry.

And so, with a mean-spirited nature common to six-year-old boys, Elliott had made fun of the prince and derided him. And every time he did so, Felix would look down sadly and say the same phrase.

"I'm sorry. I can't do anything right..."

What a miserable wretch. And yet he was far, far higher in social status than Elliott. And one day, he'd have to lead.

Although Felix lagged behind everyone else in most pursuits, he was knowledgeable about one thing in particular: astronomy. Despite the subject being of little to no use to royalty, the second prince's eyes would always sparkle when conversations turned to the stars, and whenever he had the chance, he'd hide away and read a book about them.

So Elliott had taken Felix's book while the adults and servants weren't looking and hidden it up in a tree in the gardens. As expected, Felix was ready to burst out crying. He clung to Elliott, begging for his book to be returned.

“It’s up there in the tree,” replied Elliott. “It’s not that tall, see? You could just go get it.”

Felix blanched looking up at the branches. With his awful motor skills, he’d never be able to climb it alone.

Elliott, fully aware of this, smirked and teased him even more.

“Aren’t you gonna go crying to your servant like you always do? Or ask your powerful grandfather to save you? Go on, tell them you can’t do anything by yourself.”

“.....”

The prince stared up at the tree for a while, face tense, until eventually he clenched his teeth and began shimmying up. But he wasn’t able move his limbs properly, and before long he froze and started trembling.

“Weakling,” grumbled Elliott as Felix’s shaking hand reached up for a branch... then missed, causing him to fall.

He wasn’t very high up, so Elliott simply watched it happen. But strangely, Felix didn’t get back up. Elliott cautiously approached, then saw a sharp branch stuck in the boy’s side. He’d fallen on it, impaling himself. A red stain slowly spread across Felix’s clothes, centered on that branch.

Elliott went white, screamed, and called for an adult.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?!” demanded Elliott’s father, striking his cheek.

Elliott didn’t make excuses. He knew his thoughtlessness was to blame for everything.

Felix’s wound wasn’t very deep; they’d been told the boy’s life wasn’t in danger. But he would still need several stitches.

“You’ve left him with a permanent scar,” said Count Dasvy. “And your own life won’t be enough to make up for that crime.”

His father was prepared to offer up his own head. But Felix, fresh from receiving treatment, intervened.

“Please wait!” he said.

Although his servant boy was supporting him, the prince was standing on his own two feet. Felix’s face was pale and slick with sweat. Of course it was—he’d just received sutures.

“Elliott isn’t at fault,” continued the prince. “I was fooling around and climbed the tree. Elliott tried to stop me and even cushioned my fall with his body.”

That was a huge lie. Elliott had been smirking at Felix as the prince fell, confident it wouldn’t hurt him at all.

But thanks to Felix covering for him, he had escaped blame—and his father would be able to keep his life.

After that, Elliott had barged into Felix’s room. “Why did you cover for me?” he asked. “That accident was my fault. You were badly hurt because of me!”

Is he trying to earn a favor from me? wondered Elliott, deeply suspicious.

Felix’s eyebrows drooped, and he smiled weakly. He seemed troubled.

“I fell from the tree because I didn’t know how to climb it. I can’t see any reason to blame you for that, Elliott.”

He said it like it was the most logical thing in the world. The prince seriously thought it was his own fault for not being able to climb trees.

“...When your wound heals, I’ll teach you how,” muttered Elliott.

Felix’s sky-blue eyes sparkled. “Really? Thank you so much. I’ve always thought I’d be able to see the stars better from the treetops.” The prince offered Elliott a smile—one that looked heartfelt and happy.

* * *

The reason Elliott had suddenly recalled all this was because Monica Norton had just said the same thing as the boy in his memories. Elliott had asked her why she didn’t blame him—and she’d told him she could think of no reason to—with the same look on her face as that gentle boy.

Oh. Everything finally makes sense... So that’s why he wants to coddle Lady Norton so much!

Filing that away in a corner of his mind, Elliott moved his white bishop. Monica wasted no time making her next play.

Just like last time, Monica was moving her pieces extremely quickly. She never took very long to think. Elliott would move a piece, and she'd immediately respond in kind.

And then, when Monica moved her queen, the game came to an end.

Elliott stared at the board and said, "It's a stalemate."

A stalemate—despite him having no handicap and the first-move advantage. Against a girl who had played chess only a couple of times.

Monica simply stared at the board, seeming neither pleased nor frustrated. She was probably thinking back on the game they'd just played.

"Chess has a way of bringing out someone's personality," Elliott remarked, almost to himself.

"Huh?" Monica looked at him and blinked.

Elliott shrugged a little. "Cyril plays a very easy-to-understand, protect-the-king kind of chess. He always has a strong defense. You're the opposite."

Although, to be precise, Monica's play style didn't simply favor offense. If he had to describe it, he would say she was thoroughly logical, never wasting a move.

"You'd probably even use your king as bait if it meant you could win," he continued.

For Monica Norton, the king was worth as much as a pawn. She could sacrifice any piece she needed to, as long as it increased her chances of winning by even a little bit. She was strong—merciless. If she continued to gain experience and learned how to read and manipulate her opponent...she'd become a monster at the game. The prediction made Elliott shudder.

This girl had profound abilities that even Felix struggled to grasp, but her personality was timid and subservient. The gap between her talents and comportment was almost surreal.

As Elliott's drooping eyes continued to watch her, Monica spoke.

“Lord Howard, your playing style is, well...,” she began.

“Oh? A novice wants to talk to me about how I play?”

“You seem really insistent about each piece’s role.”

Elliott’s eyebrows shot up. Mr. Boyd had pointed out the very same thing to him in the past. His play style focused far too much on each piece’s prescribed role. Queens acted like queens, pawns like pawns—he tended to give the higher-ranking pieces a greater role in his strategy. In a sense, he was the polar opposite of Monica, who didn’t assign any innate value to her pieces.

She pointed to one of Elliott’s pawns still on the board. “There was a point in the game where you could have promoted your pawn,” she explained. “It was the optimal move, but you didn’t take it.”

If a pawn reached the other end of the board—the opponent’s side—the player could upgrade it to another piece, such as a queen. Elliott had purposely avoided doing so.

Privately impressed that she’d noticed, he flashed her a sardonic smile.

“I just hate upstarts,” he said.

A soldier who cut his way straight to the deepest part of the enemy’s camp could rise in rank. Elliott despised that rule.

“My uncle, for some unfathomable reason, took a commoner as his legal wife,” he explained. “He always called her a simple, honest, kind girl. But in the end, she spent all his money. My uncle, feeling betrayed...hung himself.”

The first to find his dead, cold body had been Elliott, who had visited his beloved uncle in order to learn more about chess from him. The scene was still burned into his eyes after all this time. Essentially everything of value in his uncle’s estate had been gone by the time Elliott arrived. Upon learning of the man’s death, his wife, the former commoner, had taken it all and run—without even stopping to mourn the death of the man she had driven to suicide.

“Do you understand?” he asked. “Commoners must act like commoners and nobles like nobles. Try and cross the barrier of social status and someone *will* get hurt.”

That was why Elliott hated commoners who acted above their station. Such upstarts made his skin crawl.

At first, he'd harbored the same feelings toward Monica. Not only had she enrolled in Serendia Academy as a commoner, but she had even become a student council member. He couldn't help but view her as an eyesore—until now, at least.

I suppose rare people like her exist—the kind whose incredible talents compel them beyond their station. Elliott hadn't yet determined how to treat someone like her. So he just made a sour face and gave her a warning.

"I'm going to put aside my judgment of you for the time being, Lady Norton. But there's one thing I need to warn you about." He folded his legs and looked her right in the eyes, trying to make sure his next words got through. "Commoners born with rare talents tend to be envied by the incompetent or taken advantage of by the knavish. I know people like you whose lives have been ruined by such people."

The words were meant to stir anxiety in Monica, and they did. She went white as a sheet and tensed up.

Elliott then gave a light shrug of the shoulders in his usual sardonic way and grinned. "You need to be very careful about how you act. After all, you'll have even more eyes on you in the future."

"...Huh?"

Monica seemed not to have realized it, but someone had been watching their game from afar this whole time. A tall man with a shaved head and rippling muscles—the chess teacher, Professor Boyd.

The professor had written something in chalk on the blackboard just now. Elliott glanced over, indicating with his eyes for Monica to look as well. When she did, she froze.

Chess Competition Representatives

First Match: Monica Norton

Second Match: Benjamin Mording

Third Match: Elliott Howard

Monica's eyes opened wide, and her lips—now white—trembled as she said, "The...the chess competition...?!"

"The weekend before the school festival, we invite players from other schools and host a chess tournament. You saw the event in the budget proposals, didn't you?"

"B-but me...?! " she stammered, shaking, her face pale.

Professor Boyd walked over to them, feet pounding on the floor. With the presence of a warrior who had seen countless battlefields, he took his large hand, which might easily crush a person's head, and tapped on Monica's shoulder. He spoke in a low voice, no expression on his face.

"I have high hopes."

"I, I—I—I—I...I—I ca-ca-ca-ca, I..."

Figuring she was trying to say, *I can't*, Elliott shrugged and told her, "Let's just have fun with it, eh, Lady Norton?"

Monica continued to repeat the word *I* over and over, twitching. Elliott thought she must be only half-conscious by this point.

She was just like the boy in his memories—she crumbled under pressure.

The chess competition was a traditional event where three schools, including Serendia Academy, would each submit three players who would then participate in matches against one another.

Monica, chosen as one of the players and thus saddled with the pride of a famous school, was completely flustered. It should have been an honor to be chosen as a representative for anything, but Monica had only bad memories of such events.

She thought back to two years ago, when she'd been part of Professor Gideon Rutherford's research lab at Minerva's Mage Training Institution. Professor Rutherford was a sharp-eyed old man with clipped white hair. Though he'd been stubborn and narrow-minded, he'd generally allowed Monica to do her own research. And so she'd cooped herself up in the laboratory, working on

nothing but magic formulae.

Then, one day, Professor Rutherford—smoking a pipe—had said to her, “Hey, Everett. How about you go swing by the Seven Sages’ qualifiers for a bit?”

The Seven Sages stood at the pinnacle of magecraft in the Kingdom of Ridill. The qualifying competition for such an important group was hardly something a person could just “swing by for a bit.”

Monica had figured the man was only making a mean joke, but then he’d told her he’d already submitted a letter of recommendation and that she’d passed the documentation screening.

“Wh-why me?!” she had wailed. “...I can’t! I can’t do that! I could never!”

She’d been shaking from head to toe, wrapped up in one of the lab’s window curtains, when Professor Rutherford had carried her—still wrapped up—and practically thrown her into the competition venue.

After that, despite committing the grave blunder of passing out during her interview, she’d been chosen as one of the Sages. At the time, she felt like her stomach was going to explode from the pressure. Even so, there were two people in the world she actually wanted to inform about her selection.

The first was her foster mother and the second her only friend.

It was thanks to that friend that Monica had been able to learn uncharted magecraft and put her best foot forward at Minerva’s. At the time, she had thought it was her duty to tell him. She’d been distant from him for a little while, but she knew if she told him she’d become a Sage, he’d praise her. And then...

“Hey, Lady Norton. You’re about to run into a wall...”

Hearing a voice from above her, Monica gave a start.

This was Serendia Academy, not Minerva’s, and she was calling herself Monica Norton as cover to infiltrate the school and protect the second prince.

And now that Monica had been selected as a representative for the chess competition and she and Elliott had finished the paperwork in the staff room, they were on their way to give their report to the student council.

“Sorry...,” she mumbled in apology, looking up at Elliott, who was walking next to her.

Elliott looked back down at her, exasperated. She was clearly depressed.

“You’ve been chosen as one of our players, but you don’t seem the least bit happy about it.”

Monica didn’t say anything in response, and eventually Elliott stopped in front of the student council room.

“Well, however you feel about it, we’re still reporting it to the prince.”

“Oof... Okay...”

Reporting the matter to Felix was another thing Monica was feeling gloomy about. She and Elliott would be receiving special training for the competition every chance they had—including break times and after school. Naturally, that meant their work as student council members would come to a standstill.

I’m going to cause more trouble for Lord Cyril... She’d just been reflecting on how everyone else was always helping her and wondering if she could do something for them in return—and now this. She hung her head, the situation weighing heavily on her mind.

In the meantime, Elliott had opened the door. Felix and Cyril were inside going over some paperwork, but Bridget and Neil were absent, probably handling other tasks.

Felix looked up from the documents, moving his gaze back and forth between Monica and Elliott. He smiled.

“I heard about the chess competition. I couldn’t be happier that we have two student council members participating again this year. I’ll be expecting your best efforts as representatives of the academy. And until then, we’ll reduce your council work.”

Monica stole a glance at Cyril. He had his arms folded and his eyes were narrowed in his usual stiff stare as he looked at the two newcomers.

I hope he’s not thinking this is all...a big pain...

Monica rallied herself, unconsciously balling her hands into fists, and

struggled to get out her next words.

“Um, Your Royal Highness, Lord Cyril... I can bring my work back to my dorm with me, so—” she insisted.

“That’s ridiculous,” interrupted Cyril, cutting her down instantly. Her shoulders jolted, and Cyril continued, haughty as ever. “Our very own Serendia Academy hosts the chess competition. The rest of the student council will be present at the event as well, seeing to other matters. You need to focus on chess, lest you rub dirt in the prince’s face.”

Elliott nodded in agreement. “That’s right,” he said. “Besides, if you decide to take on all that extra work, I’d have to do the same, idiot.”

“B-but...!” stammered Monica, flustered.

“Lady Norton,” said Felix in a soft voice, “I was in the chess competition last year myself.”

“You...were?”

“I was. And the rest of the student council helped me with my work. So will you allow me to help you both this year?”

Despite Monica’s selection, Felix and Cyril were acting the same as always. They didn’t seem to find it annoying or envy her for it.

She relaxed her fists and bowed deeply to both of them.

“Thank you.”

It was just two words, but they came out surprisingly smoothly. She felt a tiny bit proud of having been able to properly convey her thanks without tripping over herself.

“You’re welcome,” replied Felix, giving her a slightly mischievous grin. “But try not to go overboard. You’re liable to stop sleeping.”

“...Oof.”

In truth, ever since the day she’d first learned the rules, she’d been borrowing chess books from the library and eating into her sleep time to read them. Especially recently—she’d been having bouts of insomnia after the incident

with Casey, and she'd been holing herself away in her attic room, using chess to distract herself.

She didn't own a chessboard, so she'd drawn squares on a piece of paper and used scraps of wood and small pebbles as the pieces. She'd play chess with herself, and before she knew it, morning would come. It had happened several times already, and evidently, Felix had noticed her lack of sleep.

As Monica restlessly toyed with her fingers, Elliott looked over at Cyril, seeming to remember something. His lips formed a dark grin.

"Come to think of it, I seem to recall *someone* getting so mad over losing to me in chess that he lost sleep studying, then fainted during our game. Does that ring a bell, Cyril?"

"...I have a meeting with the department head, so I'll be leaving early," said the vice president, his face scrunching up as he turned away and quickly left the student council room.

"Elliott, you shouldn't tease Cyril too much," chided Felix. "He takes things very seriously."

Elliott gave a little shrug. A pained grin formed on Felix's face; the other boy clearly had no intention of fixing his behavior.

"Anyway, from your point of view, how skilled is our little squirrel?"

"She's a total beast," he replied. "We've only played a few times, but she's already driven me to a stalemate once."

"Really?" responded Felix, looking a little surprised. He got up from his chair and took a chessboard and some pieces off a shelf. Then he moved to the reception table, placed everything down, and looked at Monica. "Want to try playing against me, then? If you're going to be in a competition, there's no harm in seeing how you match up with a variety of opponents."

"N-no!" she cried. "I could never get in the way of your work like that..."

"At the moment, I'm just waiting for a response from the department head, so there's nothing I need to be doing," he explained. "Let's see... If you beat me, I'll grant you one wish."

Monica's eyes went wide at the proposal. Usually a dark, shadowed brown, they now scattered the light, gleaming the color of young grass.

"Can it be...anything?"

"Of course."

Monica actually *did* have something she wanted to request from Felix. It had been too difficult for her to tell him before, but this was the perfect chance.

With a determined puff of air, she took a seat across from him.

"Th-thank you!" she said, privately eager. *I can't lose this game!* she thought.

Meanwhile, Felix watched her with a look of faint amusement.

As he faced Monica, Felix's heart was positively leaping.

In general, Monica never asked for anything. She fidgeted apologetically just borrowing a feather pen. But now she wanted something from him!

Felix was *extremely* interested in what the little squirrel wanted to ask him for. She'd been putting in the work in regard to both her classes and the council, so if she wanted something, he would be glad to give it to her as a reward.

The sight of her and Cyril drinking chocolate a while ago flashed through his mind. Felix had the feeling his favorite squirrel had gotten awfully attached to Cyril recently. In fact, she was now calling him "Lord Cyril" instead of "Lord Ashley." And yet she still called *him* "Your Royal Highness" and "sir."

Basically, he was sulking because his favorite pet had grown close to someone else.

What could a girl like her want...? A math book or something, perhaps? In that case, presenting her with the rarest one he could find and witnessing her astonishment sounded like great fun.

As he schemed, he moved his pieces. Skillfully, he aimed to lose without being obvious. With Monica's stoic offensive, the game ended easily in less than an hour. Partly because Felix was holding back—but mostly because the way she'd attacked him had been absolutely merciless. He found himself agreeing with Elliott's evaluation of her as "a beast."

“That’s...checkmate, sir,” declared Monica, breathing a sigh. The scarily impassive expression she’d worn during the game dissolved into her usual innocent look.

Perhaps I held back too much..., thought Felix. *Well, whatever. I was planning to lose anyway.*

As he mused, Elliott—who had been watching the overwhelmingly one-sided game—took on a sharp look and glared at Monica.

“I finally figured it out,” he said. “Lady Norton, you were holding back in your game against me this afternoon, weren’t you?”

Monica looked at him in confusion and shook her head. “N-no, no! I, um, I didn’t hold back at all!” she cried, desperately trying to deny it—before immediately self-destructing by insisting, “I did my absolute best to get to a stalemate!”

“I knew it!” groaned Elliott in a low voice pricked with anger. “You were aiming for a draw right from the start! You know that’s usually called ‘holding back,’ don’t you?” He pinched Monica’s right cheek. For someone without much meat on her bones, her skin was unusually stretchy.

Sobbing with her mouth half-open, Monica tried to make excuses. “I wanted to test out patterns that would result in stalematesss...,” she whined.

“So you used me as a guinea pig,” replied Elliott. “I don’t like that one bit. I’m going to tell on you and have him switch your position with mine.”

“Noooo!” she wailed. “I’m fworry!”

Elliott pinched her right cheek as she sobbed, reminding the prince of a certain rascal from his childhood. The boy was very intent on acting as noble as possible, but Felix knew that he’d been a total brat long ago.

What an energetic pair, he thought, cracking a wry grin at the way Elliott was enjoying himself despite his anger.

“All right, that’s enough. Let her off the hook,” he chided. “Otherwise, the little squirrel’s cheeks are going to stay like that.”

Sulking, Elliott removed his hand from Monica’s face. She sniffled and rubbed

at the red spot left behind.

“Anyway,” continued the prince, “what was it you wanted to ask me for?”

“It... It can be anything, right?”

“Yes, of course.” Felix nodded generously.

Monica’s face took on an uncharacteristically sharp expression. She balled her hands into fists again.

“I want you to...stop...calling me a little squirrel!”

“.....”

Maintaining his calm, gentle smile, Felix silently reached out and pinched Monica’s left cheek.

“Wh-whyyyyyy?!” she wailed.

“Wow, they *are* stretchy,” he remarked. “Mm. I can see myself getting used to this.”

“Fopp iiittt!”

“Oh. My apologies, Monica.” Felix yanked his hand away from her.

Sobbing miserably, she rubbed both cheeks and looked at him with the widest eyes he’d ever seen.

“Y-you... Huh? Just now...,” she stammered.

“Yes? What is it, Monica?” said Felix, smiling.

Monica paled everywhere except her swollen red cheeks, like some kind of parlor trick. Then, with her hands still covering them, she began to shake.

“U-ummm,” she started. “Maybe, errr, you could call me Lady Norton or Accountant Norton, um, like everyone else does...?”

“Your request was that I stop calling you little squirrel, right?” he answered nonchalantly. “I don’t remember you specifying what you wanted to be called instead.”

At last, Monica stopped moving entirely.

Felix had no way of knowing this, but Monica’s mind was now filled with the

Barrier Mage Louis Miller's arrogant laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha," he laughed. "This is what happens when you fail to define your terms, my fellow Sage."

As tears fell from Monica's eyes, she reflected on how this was a perfect example of winning the battle but losing the war.

* * *

Benjamin Mording, the second student on Serendia Academy's chess team, was a third-year in the advanced course and the son of a court musician. He'd studied music from a very young age, performing, composing, and doing everything in between. Apparently, he'd already earned some high-society fans. Benjamin had flax-colored hair neatly cut at his jaw, and his appearance was delicate and fragile.

...Yes, fragile. He was a *fragile* young man.

"Chess is music! The record sheets of chess games are musical scores! Look at a person's records, play but a single match with them, and you will see the music of their game! While some will come at you with ferocious attacks—forte, forte, sforzando!—others play with the dignity of a classic, formidable and unperturbed! Elliott's chess is like a march! A melody like a parade of well-trained soldiers, possessing beauty and strength in its regular form! Yes—simply listen, and you will hear it! The high horns signaling the commencement of hostilities! The valiant clapping of the cavalry's hooves across the ground!"

Monica wondered when Benjamin had time to breathe as he delivered this over-the-top, red-faced, spittle-firing speech. Elliott stood next to her, a tired look on his face.

"He's...something of an artist," her fellow council member explained. "Once he gets started, he goes on and on."

"O-oh," she said.

"Best to just ignore him."

It was unclear whether Benjamin had heard them or not. His thin, delicate finger danced through the air like a conductor's baton as he gazed upon the chessboard in ecstasy. The pieces on it showed the conclusion of the game he'd

just played with Monica.

“Lady Norton, your chess is like a suite performed by an orchestra! A score with no fluff, its every note from prelude to finale carefully constructed using precise calculations! A grand and sublime melody, each harmony played by every instrument to perfection—a compilation of the souls of the musicians! I would go so far as to say this miraculous score was granted to us by the god of music! What I mean to say is this...”

Benjamin turned to Monica, dropping his hands onto her slight shoulders as he continued.

“You should be our third player—the anchor of our team. Work hard.”

“I agree,” said Elliott smoothly in response.

Monica buried her face in her hands, squatted down to the floor, and squealed, “I—I...I can’t do it!”



SERENDIA ACADEMY THIRD-YEAR

Benjamin Mording

* * *

As part of the special training program for the competition, Monica had faced off against Benjamin Mording, their team's second player, for the first time.

He was a powerful opponent, and she could see why he'd been chosen as one of their school's representatives. Elliott had warned her not to try aiming for a stalemate, so she pulled no punches and won out in the end.

The result of her victory had been that impassioned speech.

"I am the weakest of the three of us," said Benjamin, as though he didn't care in the slightest. "It is only natural that I should play first!"

Monica shook her head vehemently. "That isn't true!" she insisted. "I'm the newest player, so...so...!"

"It matters not if you're a novice or a veteran," he said. "The one with the most skill plays last. And this is no mere flattery or modesty on my part! My family has a motto—lies may work on debt collectors and lovers, but never in music or chess!"

That didn't seem to Monica like a family motto anyone would want to brag about. She looked to Elliott for help, but he just shrugged.

Clearly not picking up on Elliott's tired annoyance, Benjamin continued to wave his finger about and proselytize.

"Listen well, Lady Norton. My chess has the versatility of music itself. At times it is fierce, at others it is heartrending. And yet at others it may be light and happy, grave and serious, or grand and majestic! I can reproduce any musical style with my chess at will—but that doesn't make me talented!"

"Um, I think you're very talented..., " said Monica.

"I may be somewhat strong, rather talented, a little better than average. But I know I don't stand head and shoulders above my fellows. Your skill, however, does just that. If you will not be our anchor, then I ask you—who will?!"

Elliott nodded along in firm agreement.

Oh no! thought Monica. *They're going to make me play the last match for real at this rate!* She desperately clung to them and begged.

“Please. Please, I...I’m already scared just serving as the first player. If you... make me the anchor, I’ll...I’ll...”

Dizzying memories of her past came rushing back. The interview where she’d hyperventilated. The rehearsal for the ceremony where she’d emptied the contents of her stomach all over the place. She could easily see history repeating itself the moment she was made their anchor.

As she sobbed and whimpered, Elliott put a finger to his chin and narrowed his drooping eyes. “I mean, we’ve already submitted the order to Mr. Boyd. It would be a pain to get it changed now, so...maybe we’ll just stick with what we gave him and keep me as the anchor.” He looked depressed as he fiddled with his bangs. “There’s a lot of expectations on us this year, you know. Serendia Academy absolutely crushed the competition last time.”

Monica suddenly remembered something Felix had said. He was pleased two people from the student council had been chosen again this time—and she knew he’d been on the team the previous year. In other words, someone other than Felix from the student council had participated last year.

“Um,” she said, “who from the student council competed last year?”

“The prince and Officer Maywood,” replied Elliott. “The former was our second, and the latter was our anchor.”

“...Huh?” Monica’s eyes grew large.

In general, with contests like these, the anchor was the most skilled. She’d thought for sure that would be Felix, but apparently it had been Neil—the council member who seemed least cut out for such a role!

“You know how Officer Maywood is so considerate? Like, how he always knows exactly what we want him to do.”

“Y-yes.”

“He can do the exact opposite in chess. He’ll mercilessly attack you right where you least want him to... It’s frightening.”

She had trouble imagining a gentle boy like Neil smashing his opponent’s plans like that. As she tried, all she could think of was his warm smile.

Benjamin swung his finger around like a baton again and cut in. “Maywood’s chess is like an extremely technical impromptu. He predicts his opponent’s moves, then comes up with the perfect counterpoint! It’s truly wonderful!”

“Ummm... Then what is the prince’s chess like?” asked Monica quietly, remembering her match against him. She’d beaten him handily, but it didn’t seem like he’d been taking it very seriously—or maybe it was his style to never let on what he was thinking.

Elliott’s values could be seen in the way he played from time to time, but Felix’s style concealed his own. To be honest, she felt like he’d been going easy on her. That was why Monica was interested in how Benjamin felt about it.

Benjamin put a hand to his cheek and closed his eyes. “It’s incredibly difficult to derive a musical style from the prince’s chess. But if I had to say... It may be similar to your own, Lady Norton.”

“...Huh?” said Monica, her eyes widening into a blank stare.

Benjamin lifted the finger he was using as a baton above his head, then stopped it there—before swinging it straight down like the blade of a guillotine.

“Precise, with nothing wasted... He’ll use any means at his disposal to take the king.”

* * *

“Monica, do you want to go shopping this weekend?”

With only two days left until the chess competition, Lana proposed an outing to Monica during their lunch break. Apparently, she wanted to buy some things for the school festival.

Monica shook her head as she nibbled on her bread. “I...I’m sorry. I have, um, something to do that day...”

“...The chess competition,” muttered Claudia, causing Monica to audibly choke on her bread.

Lana looked at her with a wide-eyed stare. “The student council is busy even on the day of the chess competition?”

“Um, well, yes, but...I’m, u-um—” stammered Monica.

Claudia spoke again from the seat next to her. "One of the players. In our first spot."

Monica looked at Claudia with tears in her eyes, struggling to swallow.

Serendia Academy's winning streak would depend on this year's chess competition, and the students were all watching it very closely. Lana, however, was either preoccupied with the school festival or simply didn't have much interest in chess. It seemed she hadn't even heard about Monica being chosen for the team. Monica hadn't said anything about it, either.

"Wait, Monica, they picked you for the team?!"

"I...I guess..."

Monica found it very difficult to talk to people about being selected as a representative like this.

You'd be better off living in a mountain cabin somewhere far away from everyone else. Heartless words from a distant memory whirled around in her head. She remembered the cold eyes of someone she had once considered her friend. It was enough to nearly crush her heart.

But Lana stood up with a clatter, leaned forward, and exclaimed, "That's amazing!"

Monica looked at her, agape.

Excited, Lana spoke all in a rush. "Oh, Monica, why do you always keep things like this to yourself?! I can come cheer for you, right?"

"Even though you don't know the rules of chess?" pointed out Claudia.

Lana glowered at her. "I *know* the rules. Um...I-like the names of the pieces."

"And you think you understand the game just because of that? I almost can't believe you're serious."

"Oh, who cares anyway!" Her cheeks reddening in embarrassment, Lana looked at Monica, whose mouth was popping open and closed, unable to form a reply.

Despite finding out about Monica's selection, Lana hadn't looked at her

coldly. Neither had Felix or Cyril. Monica pressed a hand to her chest, trying to calm her pounding heart.

“Yes. I’d...love that,” she managed.

“...Be careful what you say. The fool is liable to start yelling cheers at you from the stands without even knowing the rules,” remarked Claudia.

“I wouldn’t do that!” Lana yelled back before suddenly remembering something and turning to the gloomy young woman.

“Wait, didn’t you take part in the competition last year? And the other two were on the student council...”

“I’m surprised you remembered.” Claudia groaned, her beautiful face warping into an expression of bitterness, like someone had just pointed out a past mistake.

Monica recalled the girl’s face clouding over before when chess had come up during their discussion of electives.

“Lady Claudia, you took part in the chess competition?” she asked.

“I did,” replied Claudia. “And I regret putting so much effort into it. Neil wanted us both to do our best, so I did... What a mistake *that* was.”

Claudia Ashley possessed an extremely capable mind, but she absolutely *hated* when those around her relied on her for anything. Because of that, she emanated an aura of negativity to keep others away, not bothering to hide her scathing attitude from anyone but Neil. She’d probably only played in the previous year’s contest because Neil had been there.

I wonder what kind of chess Lady Claudia plays, mused Monica. I doubt she’d agree to a game if I asked, but...I’m kind of interested. Elliott had mentioned that Serendia Academy won by a huge margin the year before, so Claudia must have been a force to be reckoned with. *Maybe I’ll ask Elliott or Benjamin about her.*

Lana, seemingly remembering something else, said, “Hey, are we playing the same schools as last time?”

“Most likely,” answered Claudia. “The three big elites... The event itself is

supposed to be a friendly exchange with the University and Minerva's, after all."

...Huh? Monica felt the blood drain from her body.

How stupid she'd been! Until this very moment, she'd never even given a thought to the schools they'd be facing in the chess competition. She should have realized right away when she'd heard it was supposed to be a battle between elite institutions.

The three elite schools of the Kingdom of Ridill were Serendia Academy, attended by the children of nobles; the University, a law school under the Temple's jurisdiction; and the highest institution for aspiring mages in the land, Minerva's—the very same school Monica had once attended.

There was a loud clattering at her feet. She'd dropped the fork in her hand.

"Monica?" said Lana.

"Oh... I'm...sorry..."

Flustered, she stood from her chair and tried to pick up the fork. But her fingers were shaking too much to grasp it properly—it slid out of her hand when she tried and fell back to the floor.

Monica had skipped a year and graduated Minerva's once she'd become a Sage, but many of her classmates would still be enrolled.

It'll be okay, she told herself. I'm sure that...that none of them even remembers me.

After learning unchanted magecraft, she'd holed up in a research lab for the rest of her time there, not taking part in any conferences or research presentations. She doubted more than one or two people still remembered her face. *It'll be okay. It'll be okay. It'll be okay...*

But despite her repeated insistence, her body wouldn't stop shaking. The scornful eyes of the boy she'd believed to be her friend came back to her.

You're not my friend.

Her throat clenched up as a soft squeal escaped her lips.

She felt coming to Serendia Academy had allowed her to look toward the future, if only a little. But the chilly voice from her memories hacked away at the roots of her budding confidence.

Forgetting how to breathe properly, she began squeezing out short, shallow breaths. She was hyperventilating. Panicking, she brought her hands to her throat.

“Monica?!”

Lana, noticing something was wrong, got out of her seat and knelt beside her friend.

I can't...bother Lana with this..., thought Monica, trembling and working her paling lips.

“I’m...fine. It’s...it’s nothing...”

“It’s clearly *not* nothing!” scolded Lana, frowning.

Claudia murmured, “Do you know someone from the University or Minerva’s?”

“...!”

“By the looks of things, you do,” she noted. “And it’s someone you don’t like, too, *hmm?*”

Still clutching her chest, Monica shook her head. *No*, she thought. *That’s wrong. It’s not Bernie’s fault. I’m sure it was my fault. I did something wrong. I can’t hate him when I’m to blame for everything.*

Each time that familiar face flashed across her mind, she criticized herself again. She felt like he would never forgive her if she didn’t. *I’m sorry, I’m sorry... I’m sorry for coming out of my mountain cabin... I’m not supposed to be around people. I should have just kept on doing as Bernie said...!*

“Monica,” said Lana firmly, putting a hand on her friend’s shoulder. Monica slowly looked up at her, and Lana’s face turned to one of resolve. “The morning of the chess competition, get up a little earlier and come to my room.”

“...?”

“Promise me,” she said even more firmly.

Monica’s personality wouldn’t allow her to do anything but nod, and so she did, if a bit reluctantly.

“Don’t forget,” Lana said again, making sure Monica heard her.



CHAPTER 3

A Love Triangle Is a Thing of Beauty

Once she knew students from Minerva's would be at the chess competition, Monica stopped sleeping well at night. And on the morning of the competition, she once again woke up feeling awful. The sky outside was still dim.

She closed her eyes, intending to get some more sleep, when her once-friend's voice came back to her. *You'd be better off living in a mountain cabin somewhere far away from everyone else.* The words in her memories had chipped away at her heart so many times already. She sniffled, then covered her head with her blanket.

A few moments later, she heard soft tapping and clacking. Wondering what it was, she pulled the edge of the blanket very slightly away from her face and looked in the direction of the sounds.

"Oh, wait, I think I can do this... There we go! Heck yeah!"

"A strong move. But what will you do about this?"

"Ahhh... Grrr... B-but that's...that's...!"

On the floor of her attic room was her partner—a black cat named Nero—and a beauty in a maid's outfit—Louis's contracted spirit, Ryn. They were sitting around a chessboard Monica had borrowed from Professor Boyd to practice with.

She figured they were playing chess, but then she saw the pieces on their sides, piled up in alternating colors—black and white. Nero managed to pick up a piece with his paw and carefully lay it atop the pile...which tipped the tower's balance and caused the entire thing to come tumbling down.

"Ahhhhh!" groaned the cat. "I knew my paws weren't meant for this!"

Frustrated, Nero slapped the chessboard with his front leg. Ryn calmly cleaned up the scattered pieces.

"What are you doing?" asked Monica hesitantly.

Without a shred of embarrassment, Nero held up a chess piece and said, “Playing chess!”

“We take turns stacking black and white pieces,” continued Ryn. “Whoever causes them to fall is the loser.”

That doesn't sound like the game I know, thought Monica with a wry grin as she got out of bed. If Ryn was here, was it time for her regular report?

As Monica sluggishly began to get ready for the day, Ryn, still putting away the pieces, said, “I have heard that today is the extramural chess competition and that next week is the academy festival. Because many outsiders will be entering and exiting the premises, Lord Louis has ordered me to serve as an aide to the Silent Witch.”

With the Casey incident still fresh in everyone's memories, Monica understood Louis's caution. And if Nero and Ryn were guarding Felix, she could focus all her attention on chess.

“Um, Miss Ryn?” said Monica.

“Yes?”

“About Casey, um... What ended up happening to her?”

Under normal circumstances, Casey would have been executed for plotting to assassinate Felix. However, Louis had agreed to protect her so long as she explained the entire plot, without lies or omissions.

But if Casey resisted the investigation, then... Monica knew how cruel and shrewd Louis could be. She couldn't stop herself from trembling.

“Lady Casey Grove, daughter of Count Bright, has complied with the investigation,” said the spirit. “Lord Louis is already in secret contact with the count.”

Casey's father, Count Bright, had apparently testified that he was responsible for the entire incident and firmly denied any ties to the Kingdom of Landor. Louis, however, viewed Landor as having had a hand in the plot and was now investigating how they'd acquired the Spiralfire—the lethal magic item Casey had used.

“And a few days ago, Lady Casey Grove was sent to a convent in the north,” Ryn said in conclusion.

“I...I see...”

Every time she remembered the sadness in Casey’s voice, Monica’s chest grew tight. Casey had felt she owed a debt to the Kingdom of Landor and when she’d found out Duke Clockford intended to attack the country, she’d come here to try and stop him.

If Felix eventually became king, the duke might have used his influence over the prince to attack Landor and start a war with the Empire. Though the Empire was powerful, it had a new, young leader, and its internal order was still unstable. Strategically, it was a good time to strike.

Still, Monica couldn’t sit by and let Felix be killed. *What’s the right thing to do in such a situation?* she wondered.

Neither faction was a monolith. Each contained people with various motives—those with their own ambitions, those working for the benefit of the nation, those driven by ideals or spurred on by a desire for peace. There were so many different purposes, ideals, and desires at play. That was just how politics worked.

Even after becoming a Sage, Monica continued to believe it was best to steer clear of such matters, locking herself away in a cabin in the mountains. But now, it seemed she would have to change her ways and face the truth she’d ignored for so long.

The prince is such an amazing, talented person, she thought. Why would he be a pawn in Duke Clockford’s schemes?

Everyone knew how outstanding Felix was. But he was equally famous for being under the thumb of his maternal grandfather, Duke Clockford.

I can’t let Duke Clockford’s puppet become king. Monica would never forget Casey’s face as she said those words.

Does the prince want a war with Landor and the Empire? she wondered. *Does he even care...?*

Monica still didn't know very much about who she was guarding—the prince named Felix Arc Ridill. As for the other council members, compared to when she'd first met Cyril and Elliott, she felt like she was beginning to grasp who they were as people. Each of them had things or beliefs they kept close to their hearts and fought to keep safe.

But what about Felix? What is he fighting to protect?

From her point of view, Felix was a gentle, sociable person who was amazing at everything he did...but impossible to read.

And yet, he *had* picked up those berries for her when they'd first met. He *had* helped her with ballroom dancing and horseback riding when she'd run into trouble. He *had* encouraged her to take part in the chess competition. She didn't think all of that kindness was a lie.

I can't let him die, she thought. I...can't.

That was why the chess competition and school festival both needed to go off without a hitch. Monica turned back to Nero and Ryn.

"Let's, um, discuss where we'll be today. Nero, you keep watch for any strange mana, like you did with the Spiralflame. Miss Ryn, wind spirits can hear distant sounds, right? Please keep an ear out for any suspicious conversations near the prince."

"Agreed!" said Nero, throwing a paw high in the air.

"Understood." Ryn nodded before raising her own hand and making a suggestion. "I was actually talking with Sir Black Cat about ways to remain inconspicuous while guarding the prince on campus."

"Yeah, that's right," cut in Nero. "Check this out, Monica!"

A black shroud and a golden mist appeared and wrapped around Nero's and Ryn's bodies, respectively. Behind these veils, their forms began to twist and distort.

Eventually, the black and gold mists dissipated, revealing two young men wearing Serendia Academy uniforms. One was tall with black hair, and the other was skinny with blond hair. The black-haired one was obviously Nero. But

then, did that mean the blond-haired man was...?

“Wait... Is that you, Miss Ryn?”

The blond man gave a bow. “It is indeed. I am Rynzbelfeid, the contracted spirit of Louis Miller.”

Monica had read once in a book that spirits had no gender and thus could transform into either a man or a woman when taking on human form. Still, seeing the very moment she turned from a woman into a man was startling. She was still slender, but her frame was now definitely that of an adult male, and her voice had dropped significantly. The long blond hair she usually wore gathered behind her was now short as well.

“What do you think of that?” Nero said proudly. “Now we can hang around the school without anyone batting an eyelid!”

Next to him, Ryn impassively held up a romance novel. “In this book, the heroine gets pestered by a bad man. But in one scene, the man she’s secretly in love with interrupts and says, ‘Don’t lay a hand on my woman.’”

“Uh, I see...?” replied Monica.

“If you are pestered by someone in the same way, I will re-create this scene, so please, be at ease and feel free to involve yourself with bad men.”

“.....”

Monica was speechless.

Nero’s eyes glowed. “Hey, that’s pretty good! It sounds fun! I wanna try, too!”

“Then it shall be a love triangle among the Silent Witch, Lord Black Cat, and me. My heart dances at this development.”

Monica’s heart was not dancing at all. She put a hand up to her forehead, a pensive look on her face. “Um, both of you,” she said. “If you look like adults wearing student uniforms, I think you’ll only stand out more...”

The black-and blond-haired men stopped moving.

“Wh-what?!” exclaimed Nero, half meowing.

“Oh my goodness,” said Ryn.

It seemed like neither of them understood how old they looked. Both of them appeared to be in their mid-twenties in human form—which would doubtless arouse considerable suspicion when paired with a school uniform.

Once Monica had explained, the two of them put their heads together and began strategizing—arguing over what clothes they should wear instead. But right from the beginning, Nero could transform into a cat and Ryn into a bird. There was no need for them to go to the trouble of disguising themselves as humans.

However, they were now discussing outfits with such seriousness that Monica decided to leave them alone and make her usual morning coffee.

* * *

Serendia Academy's dorm rooms were generally made for two people, but in exchange for a large monetary contribution, a student could receive a single room. Lana was one such student, even though her father was only a baron. Her family must have donated a considerable sum.

When she got to Lana's room, Monica found a middle-aged servant woman and a dresser covered in unfamiliar items. And before long, the room filled with Monica's shrieks.

"Uwaaaaahhh, it huuuurts...!"

"Come on, Monica, exhale! Say *phew*!"

"Guh...!"

"Not *guh*! *Phew*!" Lana, standing behind Monica, pulled the corset's strings tighter, then swiftly tied them up. "It might hurt a little at first, but you'll get used to it in no time at all..." she continued. "Actually, this one's just for casual clothing. Corsets for parties are even more elaborate, you know."

Apparently, party corsets even included frames meant to fluff out the wearer's skirt. Monica was finally getting a taste of the struggles glamorous society women endured behind the scenes. She put on her school uniform over the corset. Apparently, Lana had called her here to lend it to her. She even offered to do Monica's makeup for the day, partly as practice for the upcoming ball.

Lana sat Monica down in front of the dresser and, with practiced hands, used pins to hold back the other girl's hair.

"If this were an evening party, I'd give you the most gorgeous makeup, but since you're going to a chess competition, I'll keep it light," said Lana. "Oh, I know. Let's bring your bangs into a slight slant. That should do a lot to change up your look."

It's only a chess competition. Is any of this really necessary? wondered Monica, a little bewildered.

"Hey, I'm not trying to pry, but...", murmured Lana, trailing off.

"Huh?"

"There might be someone you don't want to meet there, right? At the chess competition, I mean."

Monica's shoulders immediately tensed up. Lana was right. It wasn't guaranteed anyone who knew her would be there, but just hearing that students from Minerva's were coming set her nerves on edge.

She clammed up as Lana began dabbing white powder onto her cheeks.

"Put on some makeup, change your hair, and you'll look completely different," Lana continued. "Even if you *do* run into whoever it is, they might not even recognize you."

"...!"

For Monica, who had only ever thought to pull her hood down over her face to keep people from noticing her, Lana's words were like a revelation.

"My father once told me that a person's first impression of you is mostly based on posture and expression. Whether your features are pretty is generally not as important."

Apparently, the corset had been meant to fix Monica's posture more than her figure. Whenever Monica started to hunch over, it would dig into her, forcing her to sit up straight whether she liked it or not.

Then Lana began to apply makeup that would make the color of Monica's face appear brighter. She hid the darker areas with white powder and topped it with

a touch of blush. Monica had never taken care of her eyebrows, so Lana cleaned them up a little. For her dry, cracked lips, she used a beeswax cream to bring out their shine, then added a tiny bit of lip color to accentuate Monica's complexion. Finally, Lana took a pair of thin-rimmed glasses from a rectangular case and placed them on Monica's nose. They didn't have proper lenses, so they wouldn't affect her vision, but Monica was still a little flustered wearing glasses for the first time.

"There! All done!" said Lana with a grin before taking a step to the side so Monica could see herself in the dresser's mirror.

And when Monica did so, her eyes grew wide, and her mouth fell open. Reflected in the mirror was a girl with a healthy complexion.

A little makeup obviously wasn't going to transform her into a beauty who would turn heads wherever she went. The girl in the mirror was simple and plain, with round eyes, a low nose, and a small mouth. The kind of girl you could find anywhere.

Nevertheless, the usually frail-looking Monica now appeared bright and healthy. That alone was a huge shock. More than anything, though, the glasses made her look more mature. She doubted anyone would mistake her for a preteen.

"I look... I look so healthy!" she exclaimed.

"That's your first impression?" asked Lana, a little exasperated. She seemed satisfied with her work, however. "Glasses can really change a person's look. It's kind of nice every once in a while, don't you think?"

"Yeah! ...Yeah!" Monica nodded several times, her cheeks flushing. Lana, in high spirits, gave a proud sniff and told her servant to bring something over.

What more could there be? wondered Monica. *This is all so wonderful already!*



As she continued to gape at herself in the mirror, the servant brought an unfamiliar metal tool up behind her. It looked vaguely like a pair of scissors but with rounded tubes instead of sharp blades. The handle was made of wood. To Monica, who didn't know what it was for, it looked like an instrument of torture...and no sooner had this thought occurred to her than the servant began to heat the tool with fire.

"L-Lana...? What is that thing? It looks like a torture device..."

"A torture device? You... No, this is an iron."

"A...a heated iron?" Monica thought of the irons used to brand livestock. She began to shake, wondering if Lana was about to press that thing against her skin. Lana looked at her, eyes narrowed.

"A curling iron," she said. "It's for curling your hair."

"Curling...my hair?" It was all Monica could manage to blankly parrot back the words. She had never heard of such a thing.

Lana picked up a comb and turned toward Monica. "This is the main event. You must promise me not to move your head at all, starting now. Okay?"

* * *

On the morning of the chess competition, the student council members were required to assemble a little earlier than usual in order to welcome the students from the other schools. When the rest of the student council saw Monica heading to the reception room they'd be using, their expressions changed all at once.

Everyone had noticed her new look, and they were staring—and not in an *oh, from what land doth this beautiful princess hail?* sort of way, either.

"Lady Norton looks like a second-year student in the advanced course..." murmured Elliott.

That said it all. In other words, she generally either looked like a second-year student in the *intermediate* course or someone even younger. Elliott's remark might have come off as rude to some people, but not to Monica. Her eyes sparkled as she nodded vigorously.

“D-do I really?”

“Yeah, you really do,” muttered Elliott vaguely.

Monica basked in this confirmation, deeply moved. For someone who others had always described as having a child’s body or a baby face, being told she looked her age was the greatest compliment she could think of.

Right now, she was wearing a corset to correct her bad posture, her face was brighter thanks to the makeup, and she had glasses on. Her light-brown hair had a slight curl to it at the ends, and she was wearing it half up, tied with her usual ribbon. Her new appearance was by no means gaudy, but just a little bit of curling at the tips of her hair and a different style had really changed the way she looked.

Monica now gave the impression of an utterly normal, healthy girl. Unfortunately, the others’ surprise at her transformation only proved how unhealthy she normally appeared.

As Monica quietly giggled to herself in delight, Cyril said dubiously, “I wasn’t aware you had poor eyesight, Accountant Norton.” His question was only natural—she never wore glasses.

She shook her head and replied, “These aren’t real lenses.”

“Then why do you need to wear them at all?”

The false glasses were purely a disguise meant to fool any acquaintances Monica might run into. But ever since putting them on, she’d had another thought, too.

“When I wear glasses like this...,” she began, looking up at Cyril and balling her hand into a fist, “I look like I’m really good at chess!”

“.....”

“I look like I’m *really* good!”

“.....”

Cyril fell silent. There was a strange, incomprehensible expression on his face.

Bridget muttered, “If you don’t have it where it counts, there’s no point.”

“But looks are important, too,” Neil cut in with a wry grin. “Last year, when I took part, people were wondering what a student in the intermediate course was doing there...” He spoke casually, but it was clear the comment had gotten to him.

“I...I see,” stammered Cyril in response.

Neil’s gaze settled somewhere far off in the distance. “I still think about it sometimes. Maybe I won last year’s game because my opponent was treating me like a child...”

“You mustn’t put yourself down like that,” Felix gently admonished. “You played splendidly. No one would say otherwise.”

After directing a soft smile at Neil, Felix turned to look at Monica. He took a lock of her hair between his fingers and brought it to his lips.

“Absolutely stunning,” he said. “You’re always pretty, but today you look all the more refined and lovely. Your beauty is like a flower whose tightly closed buds have begun to open, luring the butterflies to rest their wings on your petals.”

Monica didn’t understand a single word of Felix’s poetic phrasing, so she decided to simply ask him directly.

“D-do I look like a student in the...advanced course?”

“You do indeed.”

Monica didn’t say a word, but her lips trembled with suppressed glee.

“Oh,” said Felix. “I see that had more of an effect.”

Monica didn’t have much interest in fashion—none at all, in fact. For a girl who had hidden herself away in a cabin and never gone out to see anyone, fashion wasn’t exactly a necessity.

But since coming to Serendia Academy and having Lana teach her how to braid her hair, her mindset had started to shift ever so slightly—at least enough for Claudia’s “child body” comments to bother her.

“It’s nearly time,” said Bridget, glancing at the clock. “I think we should leave the idle games at that, sir.”

Felix reluctantly removed his hand from Monica's hair, then looked around at everyone.

"In that case," he said, "let's go greet the students from the University and Minerva's."

At the mention of her former school, Monica's jubilation faded, and she collected herself. *It'll be okay. It'll be okay... If I stand up straight and don't act shy, then unless something crazy happens, nobody will know it's me.* She took a quiet, deep breath, then headed off with the other student council members.

As they walked, Monica had her once-friend on her mind—Bernie Jones. Now that she thought about it, Bernie had been the one to introduce her to chess. She'd never even heard of it before then, but she'd found some students playing the game in one of the classrooms at Minerva's and asked him about it.

"Bernie? Bernie? What are those people doing?"

"That's chess. It's a game you play on a board... Just an idle amusement people use to kill time," he'd said, snorting derisively. "Minerva's is for studying magic. Coming here and establishing a chess club is absurd. We all made it into the greatest mage-training institution in the realm, and we should spend our time mastering magecraft."

Bernie had looked at those students in the chess club with such scorn—Monica felt certain he wouldn't be caught dead playing the game.

* * *

The chess competition was to be held in a multipurpose classroom on the second floor of the Serendia Academy school building. In the room, the students and chaperone teachers from the University and Minerva's were already seated and chatting amongst themselves.

As the student council members and players from Serendia Academy entered, all conversation immediately ceased.

Hiding behind Felix, who was walking in front, Monica glanced at the table for Minerva's.

Their chaperone was a young, male teacher who seemed a little lost. His dark, curly brown hair was mussed up as if he hadn't combed it that morning, and he

wore the clothes of a scholar who didn't particularly care about his appearance.

Monica didn't recognize him. He was young, so he'd probably become a teacher after her graduation. *We definitely don't know each other*, she thought. *So he should be fine...*

She shifted her gaze away from the chaperone to the three students behind him. The two standing in front were people she'd never seen before. The third stood behind the other two, and she couldn't make out their face, but when she caught a glimpse of blond hair peeking out, her heart skipped a beat. Her breath caught in her throat, and she started to hear the rushing of her blood deep within her ears.

Then the boy left the shadow of the other students and boldly walked toward Felix. His behavior betrayed no fear, despite Felix's royal lineage—after all, he was the son of Count Ambard, one of the most renowned noble families in the kingdom.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Royal Highness," he said. "I am Bernie Jones, representing Minerva's."

His voice was a little lower than she remembered, but it was definitely him. Wavy blond hair, intellectual features, and a pair of slightly too large glasses.

But why...? How...? thought Monica, barely keeping herself from trembling. Her hand, now slick with a cold sweat, squeezed the front of her skirt. Her vision began to blink white as she recalled the last time she'd seen him.

His face, twisted with hate. His mocking eyes. The words he'd spoken, brimming with enmity.

As she started to hang her head, the corset dug into her ribs. She couldn't let herself look at her feet. She had to straighten up.

Awkwardly, she fixed her posture as the players began exchanging greetings. Each student from all three schools would step forward and shake the hands of the others while introducing themselves in turn.

The first ones to give their greetings were the University students. All three were boys with their hair cut short. Their features made them look extremely serious, as if they were personally embodying the University's strict school

environment. Their teacher, a Mr. Redding, was a short-haired, sharp-eyed man in his forties.

After exchanging greetings with them, Monica turned back to face the representatives from Minerva's. This group gave off a more scholarly impression, just like Bernie and their teacher. And at the moment, none of them was staring at Monica or trying to say anything.

It'll be okay, she told herself desperately. Nobody knows I'm the Silent Witch. Nobody knows...

Bernie stepped up in front of her and extended his right hand. "I'm Bernie Jones. Pleased to meet you."

Her rib cage hurt again. Usually, when the corset dug into her skin, it was because she was failing to keep up her posture. *Back straight, back straight*, she repeated to herself as she took Bernie's hand.

"...I'm Monica Norton. It's a pleasure...to make your acquaintance."

Her voice came out a little stiff, but she didn't stumble over the words.

Lana had told her a person's first impression depended mostly on their posture and expression. While Monica found it difficult to put on a natural smile like everyone else, she managed to steady her face by tightly pursing her lips.

It would have been an exaggeration to say she felt like a completely different person, but the makeup Lana had applied nonetheless lent her a bit of courage.

I'll be okay. Lana did my makeup. He'll never know. He'll never, ever know.

As she repeated that phrase to herself like a mantra, the University's Mr. Redding looked over the players from Serendia Academy.

"It appears you have a different team from last year," he observed, smoothly and politely in spite of his intimidating face.

Professor Boyd nodded gravely, his face like a mercenary's. "Our school changes out its representatives every year."

"Your team last year was incredibly strong," replied Redding. "I had been looking forward to another battle of wits with them... Don't you agree, Lord Pitman?"

The teacher from Minerva's, apparently named Pitman, seemed a little distracted, however.

"Lord Pitman?" repeated Redding.

Suddenly snapping to attention, Pitman gave an awkward laugh. "Oh, yes. You're right. Indeed."

Mr. Redding seemed very straitlaced, while Pitman came off as a little absent-minded. But both teachers had praised the academy's team of the previous year—in a way that might imply they didn't consider this year's players much of a threat.

Despite that, Professor Boyd declared, with a voice that seemed to reverberate from the depths of the earth, "We have another strong team this year."

Professor Boyd was a man of few words, but each one he uttered carried incredible weight. Redding's face appeared to tense up, but Pitman was still grinning.

"I look forward to it," said Mr. Redding. "You'll find the University's team quite different this year."

"Minerva's has been blessed with many promising students as well," added Pitman. "I believe it will be an exciting competition."

The games hadn't even started yet, and there were already more sparks flying between the teachers than the students.

Although the stated aim of this competition was to foster positive exchange among the three schools, it was still a venue in which they could compete for dominance. The University had recently been on a winning streak, but Serendia Academy had ended that quite handily the year before. They seemed particularly on edge today.

Mr. Redding threw a glance at Monica and narrowed his eyes. "I see Serendia once again has a girl on the team. Lady Claudia Ashley showed incredible skill last year. You said your name was Lady Monica Norton, yes? Shall I expect as much from you?"

Suddenly part of the conversation, Monica jolted. Not many girls competed in chess—even fewer were chosen as representatives for these tournaments. Apparently, she was the subject of a good amount of attention just because of her gender. She froze in place, her back ramrod straight.

Professor Boyd gently clapped Monica's shoulder with a large hand. "She's new but very promising."

"Oh, then I very much look forward to it," said Redding, sparks almost visibly flying between him and Boyd.

Almost at her limit, Monica maintained her posture and expression as she began to mentally calculate the value of pi.

"You're really the center of attention, eh?" said Elliott casually, probably trying to lighten the mood. Unfortunately, Monica was in no state to help out.

"Hey, Monica! Hey!" Elliott waved his hand in front of her face, but she didn't hear a word he said.

"Two eight four seven five six four eight two three three seven eight six seven eight three one six five..."

"Oh no, she's gone. It's just like what happened with the accounting ledgers."

Elliott sighed and put a hand to his forehead just as their second, Benjamin Mording, dramatically extended his hands and raised his voice.

"There is no need to worry! Serendia Academy's wondrous trio performance is sure to capture the hearts of all who hear it! If Lady Norton is our virtuoso pianist and Elliott our mellow violinist, then I am the ever-changing cellist who shakes the hearts of the audience! Ahhh, I can hear it now—the cries of our listeners' souls, moved by the music of our pieces!"

Monica had retreated to the world of numbers—and Benjamin to the world of music. Elliott, caught with one on either side, looked up at Professor Boyd with an utterly exhausted expression on his face. The competition hadn't even started yet.

"...I finally understand why you made me the anchor," said Elliott.

He'd drawn the short straw. It was up to him to serve as the glue and hold

their team together.

* * *

While Monica recited the digits of pi, the anchors from each school drew lots to decide the order of the matches.

The first, held in the morning, would pit Serendia Academy against the University. After breaking for lunch, the second match would be Minerva's versus Serendia. Then, after a short recess, the third would take place—between Minerva's and the University.

That meant Monica's team's match against the students from Minerva's, including Bernie, would be second, right after lunch. That said, Bernie was their team's anchor, so he wouldn't be playing against Monica, Serendia's first player.

Once the opening ceremony was finished, they took a short break in advance of the first match. Monica left the waiting room and headed for the powder room, which had a mirror. She was a little worried the hair Lana had styled for her had started to come undone.

Given the number of young noblewomen at Serendia Academy, powder rooms were all over the place. Monica hurried into the nearest one and checked her hair and makeup. Confirming they were both fine, she gave herself a closer inspection in the mirror. It showed a normal girl with a healthy complexion.

There *had* been a mirror in the cabin she used to live in. Louis, unable to endure her appearance, had brought her one, instructing her to pay a little more attention to how she looked.

Monica had barely used it, though. She wasn't interested in her appearance. At the time, she'd figured if she had to go out in public, she could just wear a hood.

But now I think I understand what Mr. Louis meant, she thought.

In society, one's appearance was a weapon. Monica only needed to look as far as Felix and Bridget to see that. Keeping it up was the same as arming yourself. When she thought about it like that, her corset started to feel like a

piece of armor. At first, she'd found it stifling—but now it was actually rather heartening.

She fixed her glasses—which had slipped a little—then said to herself in the mirror, “O-okay. Time to do my best.” Though she was a little embarrassed at putting words to her determination, she could feel courage well up within her.

She nodded to herself in the mirror, then left the powder room behind. There was still a little time until the first match started, but there was no harm in getting back early.

As she hurried down the hall, a figure appeared from around the corner in front of her. The moment she saw who it was, she almost tripped.

“Excuse me, Lady Monica Norton.”

Wavy blond hair and familiar old eyeglasses. A perfectly fitted Minerva's uniform.

Monica had to try very hard not to immediately reply, *Bernie!*

Bernie had a friendly smile on his face. When around someone he knew well, his smile was always a little sardonic. But he was a high-born noble from a prestigious family—when it came to people he'd just met, he could reel in that sarcastic nature and act sociably. That was the sort of smile he wore now.

He doesn't...realize I'm Monica Everett, does he? Monica thought, gulping. How was she supposed to respond? If she said the wrong thing, the cat might be out of the bag for good.

The correct move was to say she was in a hurry and head past him. And yet...

Bernie was the one who spoke to me.

It had been a long time since Bernie had said a word to her. It filled her heart with fondness and loneliness and caused her feet to come to a stop. He'd thrust her aside so coldly, and yet she was *still* happy he'd spoken to her.

“Would you happen to have a moment, Lady Norton?” he asked.

Monica nodded, still unable to speak.

Bernie returned a polite smile and continued. “I was surprised when I first

met you. You look a lot like someone I used to know. And, coincidentally, you have the same first name.”

Someone he used to know... *Ah, of course. He wouldn't call me a friend at this point*, thought Monica, privately disappointed. That disappointment surprised her. It seemed she still wanted to be Bernie's friend, even after he'd started to hate her.

“By the way, Lady Norton, have you been going to Serendia Academy for long?”

“.....”

Monica was a transfer student. If she nodded, he'd quickly find out it was a lie. But if she shook her head, his suspicions might turn into something more solid. She wasn't sure whether to answer or not.

Unfortunately, the time she took to think proved fatal.

“Is there some reason you can't say?” he asked, suddenly a little nearer to her. Up close, she could tell he'd gotten taller. Before, she had to look up only a little bit to meet his eyes, but now she had to crane her neck.

His eyes—narrowed behind the lenses of his glasses—watched her coldly, demanding an answer. She took a step back, only for him to immediately take a step forward, clearly unwilling to let her go.

What...do I do? What do I do? What do I do...?!

Monica clasped her hands at her chest and began to tremble.

And when Bernie saw her frightened demeanor, his stare grew even colder.

He's angry, she thought. *Bernie's angry. I have to say I'm sorry. I have to beg for forgiveness...*

Just as Monica, in the thrall of her memories, was about to start apologizing through trembling lips, someone yanked on her from behind.

From overhead came a voice—far more amused than the situation called for. “Hey, hey! Don't you dare lay a hand on my woman, got it?”

Monica awkwardly twisted her neck to look up at the person standing next to

her, who now had a hand on one of her shoulders. It was a tall, black-haired man, smirking and wearing formal attire.

N-Nero...?!

Why was he in formal dress? And had it really been necessary for him to use that romance-novel line at a time like this?

As she stood there, dumbfounded, she suddenly felt a weight on her *other* shoulder. Moving only her eyes to look, she saw a blond-haired man in formal attire just as gaudy as Nero's—it was Ryn.

“Do not lay a hand on my woman, my lord.” His expression was sharp, but he'd said the exact same thing as Nero.

Monica's eyes widened as far as they could go. Her mouth flapped open and closed. But Bernie was probably even more surprised than her at the two flamboyantly dressed men—completely out of place—suddenly showing up and interrupting.

“Wh-what's with you people...?”

Yeah. What's with you two? thought Monica, although she didn't say it out loud, of course.

In any case, both Nero and Ryn seemed awfully enthusiastic about the whole thing, like they were really enjoying themselves. Her head started to hurt again. Nero's eyes were practically sparkling. He hadn't rushed over to her because he was worried—he'd just wanted to have some fun.

Ryn, on the other hand, gave Bernie an extremely grave look and declared, “A love triangle is a thing of great beauty, and in my personal opinion, it would be absolutely ruined by adding an additional side... And so I must ask you to withdraw.”

What an absurd argument.

But Bernie, whether intimidated by the blond man's odd enthusiasm or just finding the whole thing ridiculous, took a step back. He looked a little embarrassed as he pushed his glasses back up with his index finger.

“...I apologize for bothering you before your match.”

That was all he said before turning his back to Monica and leaving.

Once Bernie was completely out of sight, Monica fell to her knees on the spot, exhausted. She felt a cold sweat covering her body, and she was pretty sure the encounter had taken a lot more out of her than the chess matches would.



“Hey, did you see that? Did you see my acting?! I was on point! Talk about awesome.”

“I feel as though I have accomplished today’s mission in its entirety with that one scene.”

Monica looked up at the smug pair and asked, in a voice so hoarse it made her sound like she was on her deathbed, “Um, what...are you wearing...?”

Both of them had on gorgeous outfits, the kind one might wear to a ball. They stuck out like sore thumbs.

Ryn answered coolly. “It was pointed out to me that with our apparent ages, we could not wear a uniform. So we revised our choice of clothing.”

“Revised...,” murmured Monica vacantly.

Ryn nodded. “The idea behind our disguises is that we’re a pair of overly excited fellers who wanted to put on our formal clothes even though the school festival hasn’t started yet.”

“Perfect disguises, right?!”

Both Ryn and Nero made it sound like their idea was a stroke of genius. Monica, caught between the flashy pair, couldn’t help but bury her face—along with her glasses—in her hands.

“Look, you two... I’m really grateful you saved me, but...please...I’m begging you—please just transform into a cat and a bird...”

She thoroughly regretted not giving them a sterner warning earlier that day.



CHAPTER 4

My Friend

The set up for the chess competition featured table sets to be used by the players and, a short distance away, audience seating. This distance was meant to help prevent the audience from distracting the players.

By the time Lana arrived in the classroom, the student council members not on the roster were already seated on the long bench in the very front row. As she hesitated over where to sit, Claudia and Glenn—who had come with her—moved directly to the front bench and positioned themselves on either side of Neil.

Cyril's eyebrows flew up as Glenn pushed him to the side. "Don't push! There are plenty of other seats!"

"But if I sit next to Neil, he'll be able to explain the games to me!" insisted Glenn.

"Is there a *problem* with me sitting next to my fiancé?" asked Claudia. "Well, *dearest elder brother?*"

Watching the two of them made Lana feel ridiculous for hesitating, and she plopped herself down right next to Claudia.

Monica was already sitting at one of the chess tables. When she noticed Lana and the others, she looked up at them. Lana gave her a little wave, and Monica's lips squirmed as she covertly returned it.

"Man, everything's so authentic. What's that over there for?" asked Glenn, pointing to a large board set between the players and the audience.

"That's used to show the progress of the games and explain what's going on," answered Neil. "Do you see the grid drawn on it? They'll add tacks shaped like the pieces to show you how the games are going."

"Ohhh," said Glenn. "I guess it's 'cause we can't see the chessboards from here, huh?"

Claudia, snuggling up to Neil, glared at Glenn, her eyes narrowed. “...You talk as if seeing the board would help you.”

“Hey, I know how chess works!” insisted Glenn. “You get yourself into a good position, then say *checkmate*! It’s super cool—like calling out the name of your finishing move in a duel!”

Hearing Glenn prattle away truly set Lana’s mind at ease. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one with no knowledge of the game. As she sighed quietly in relief, she overheard a conversation from nearby.

On one of the benches in the front row sat Serendia Academy’s chess instructor, Professor Boyd, along with his peers from the University and Minerva’s. The teacher from the University seemed to be speaking to Professor Boyd. Lana recalled the first match would be between Serendia and the University.

“You’ll find us a force to be reckoned with,” said the man from the University. “We have a very talented new first-year, after all. He came to this nation all the way from Landor specifically to study chess—and he picked our school, too. He’s a famous chess player said to be unmatched among the students of his own country.”

He spoke smoothly and at length, while the teacher from Minerva’s to his side gave only a subdued response.

“He came all the way to another country to study? Impressive.”

“Yes, yes!” agreed the University instructor. “He’s incredibly talented. It’s just that he can be a bit set in his ways at times. We would normally put a boy of his talents in the anchor position, but he insisted on being the first player because he’s the youngest and wouldn’t take no for an answer. I do feel as though I should apologize to the first players on the other teams.”

Lana unconsciously looked over at the player names written on the board. The highly anticipated newcomer from the University—the exchange student from the Kingdom of Landor—was named Robert Winkel. He would be Monica’s opponent in the first match.

“Oh, I daresay,” continued the University teacher, “I feel sorry for the young

lady. She seems quite capable for a girl, but our ace will likely prove a bit too much for her.” He stole a glance at Professor Boyd’s stern features.

The Serendia professor’s face was severe, as if he were in the midst of battle. In a low voice, he said, “I apologize in advance.”

“Do you, now? Whatever for? Do you mean to say your female student is so weak, she won’t even pose a threat?”

“For making Monica Norton our first.”

“Ah, I see! So Serendia has gone out of its way to choose a female student for their team in order to liven things up! Or is she the daughter of a noble house who made a very hefty financial contribution to the school? Serendia certainly is different from our University—we value meritocracy above all else. But I suppose these things happen, hmm?”

How rude can you be?! thought Lana, gritting her teeth in anger. How dare he speak that way about Monica!

After a pause, Boyd said, “I made Monica Norton our first because she has little experience.”

“Yes, indeed. I should expect a lady would have few opportunities to play chess. How many years has she been playing?” asked the University professor, stifling a grin. “Or has it only been one?”

Boyd held up two thick fingers.

“Two weeks,” he said.

There was another person listening in on the teachers’ conversation—a player from Minerva’s, Bernie Jones. His slender eyebrow twitched as he continued to stare hard at Monica where she was seated in the players’ area.

* * *

Desperately trying to control the pain in her stomach, Monica took her seat. Her stomachache was not due to the pressure of having to play chess, but rather because Bernie was already so close to discovering her identity.

She was also anxious about whether Nero and Ryn were keeping watch as she’d instructed. She wanted to believe they’d be fine, since she’d made

absolutely sure they knew what she meant, even checking multiple times...but they *also* seemed to quite like those clothes, so she remained uneasy.

She sighed to herself as the University boy seated across from her spoke up. "Are you feeling unwell?"

"N-no, I'm... I'm fine..."

"Oh."

The student, named Robert Winkel, was apparently younger than her at sixteen years old, but he was so tall he hardly looked it. Not only did he have height, he had muscle—in fact, he looked like he'd be more at home swinging a sword than playing chess.

I have to focus on the game in front of me, Monica told herself.

"Looks like it's time," her opponent said. "Let's have a good game."

"Y-yes, let's...have a good game."

She choked.

And she'd been doing such a good job speaking so far, too. It embarrassed her to slip up now, after all that—but she was depressed for only a few seconds. When she lifted her head and stared at the chessboard, all the shame and unease in her mind vanished, replaced by chess and chess alone.

Robert seemed surprised by the abrupt change in her demeanor, but Monica didn't even notice.

The only things in her mind were the pieces on the board.

As the games began, Glenn put a hand up to his face and almost shouted out a cheer before Neil, noticing him, put his own hand over his friend's mouth.

"No shouting during the games!"

"Mrfh... I was just trying to say, *You can do it, Monica.* That's all..."

"No means no," scolded Neil.

Next to Glenn, Cyril rubbed his temples as though he'd gotten a headache.

"Officer Maywood," he said, "in order to maintain our school's dignity, please

make sure Glenn Dudley shuts his mouth.”

Claudia smirked. She had a wicked grin—anyone who saw her would know instantly that whatever she was thinking, it was far from proper.

“Then if I loudly cheer for Monica, Neil will cover my mouth with his hand, will he? How...worrisome.”

“Nothing about that is *worrisome*,” retorted Lana, more curious about the game. “Hey, what’s going on anyway? Who’s winning?”

Claudia looked at her in exasperation. “...One cannot tell who is winning or losing this early on.”

Lana, who didn’t know much about chess, reluctantly fell silent.

Then Glenn, released from Neil’s hand, said in a voice slightly more restrained than usual, “But isn’t Monica’s game developing really quickly? The pieces are moving twice as fast as at the other tables.”

He was right. The board showing the status of the games was updating with abnormal speed, but only on the first players’ section. The student moving the pieces on the simulation board seemed almost frantic as he looked back and forth between the actual chess game and the board in front of him.

Knowing full well she’d be ridiculed for it, Lana asked Claudia a question. “Hey, is there a rule in chess where playing more quickly gains you an advantage?”

“...Turns in chess have time limits, so it’s not a bad thing to play quickly. But Monica is playing far *too* quickly.”

Monica was consistently taking three seconds or less to think about her moves. In fact, from an outsider’s perspective, it almost looked like she wasn’t thinking about them at all.

Glenn struck his palm with a fist. “I’ve got it! She’s moving quickly to put pressure on her opponent!”

Cyril groaned, his face a mix of emotions. “That *is* a known strategy, but... would Accountant Norton do something like that?”

Then, as the board was updated with Monica’s latest move, Cyril’s, Neil’s, and

Claudia's expressions all abruptly changed. It wasn't just them, either. Aside from Lana and Glenn, who were clueless about chess, basically everyone present had begun to focus intently on the first players' match.

Felix, who had been watching in silence until now, looked out of the corner of his eye at Bridget, who sat next to him. "See? She's the real thing," he said.

Bridget hid her mouth with her folding fan and narrowed her eyes. Her amber irises were carefully and quietly trained on Monica.

"I had heard she was the foster daughter of the former Countess Kerbeck and was treated like a servant, never receiving a noble child's education. And yet she has a mastery over advanced mathematics and incredible skill at chess..."

A beautiful and perfectly ladylike smile spread across her lips as she continued to observe the other girl.

"Where must one come from, and what sort of education must one receive, to end up like her? ...I find myself *highly* interested."

Felix responded with a perfect, princely smile of his own. "I agree. I'm quite fascinated myself."

During their brief exchange, the high-level back-and-forth on the chessboard was proceeding at a terrifying pace. When Robert took the offensive, Monica rebuffed him with extreme precision. She would counter immediately, as though she'd known what he was planning from the start, and then Robert, undaunted, would play his next move. They were reading two turns ahead, or three, or ten. It was obvious to everyone how wildly different the first players' match was from the other two—it was on another level.

In the faculty seating, Mr. Redding's face was white as he muttered, "Two weeks, you say? T-two *weeks*?"

Meanwhile, seated with the other students from Minerva's, Bernie Jones was glaring at Monica with dark eyes.

Monica moved her knight, then breathed a short sigh. As her fingers left the piece, her impassive expression dissolved, and her eyebrows drooped nervously.

She began to play with her fingers like she always did as she said, “Um, that’s...checkmate.”

The most advanced match that would be seen at the tournament had ended in a shockingly short amount of time. Almost an hour later, the second and third players finished their matches. It ended in a University victory, with two wins to one, but everyone understood exactly who the strongest player was.

* * *

After the first set of matches, a simple stand-up meal doubling as a mixer was held, hosted by the student council. Its only participants were the players and teachers from each school, plus Serendia’s student council members. The students who had come to watch the games took their lunches separately.

Monica stood in a corner of the room and tried to remain inconspicuous, though her eyes darted this way and that. Bernie was eating lunch and cheerfully chatting with the other students from Minerva’s. He had made no further moves toward her, but she couldn’t let her guard down. She had to keep as much distance between them as possible.

As she was thinking about this, Elliott and Benjamin walked up to her holding plates with snacks and refreshments.

“Hey, Lady Norton,” said Elliott. “I saw the record of your match.”

He sounded vaguely bitter. Then again, only Monica had won her game against the University; Elliott and Benjamin had lost. Maybe he was annoyed she was the only one to achieve victory.

As she fidgeted nervously, Elliott brought his face close to hers to peer at her, then poked his index finger into her forehead. “We did all that practice together... But you were going easy on me, weren’t you?”

“N-no, I wasn’t... I wasn’t doing anything of the sort!”

“It doesn’t take a pro to look at this match and see you pulled your punches during practice. What even *was* that game?! It seemed like every move you made was a new, unorthodox tactic... This match could go down in chess history, you know.”

“No, th-that’s...that’s an exaggeration,” insisted Monica, Elliott’s finger still

digging into her forehead.

“Oh, don’t bully our junior so,” chided Benjamin. “A concerto doesn’t materialize if one performer stands out above the other. Only when the participants’ abilities are evenly matched can they reach toward greater heights and create the most beautiful melodies. Her opponent was extremely talented—and that is exactly why Lady Norton could exercise the full extent of her own abilities. In other words, her not doing so thus far is a product of our own shortcomings. Do not fancy yourself wronged in some way.”

Benjamin paused, then gave a shake of his flaxen locks and looked toward the ceiling. “...Ah! I do so wish I could have seen the moment this wonderful melody was born in person, rather than merely reading the records! Oh God! Why did you choose me as a player?! I wanted to watch her from the audience!”

He was being overly dramatic, but he had a point. Robert Winkel was the strongest opponent Monica had ever faced, and that was why she’d been able to search for novel tactics during the game.

As she idly basked in the afterglow of a thoroughly enjoyable match, she saw someone coming over to her. He was tall and lean and looked older than her despite his younger age, with short black hair and sharp, intrepid features. It was Robert Winkel himself, Monica’s opponent in the previous match and the subject of their conversation just now.

“Lady Monica Norton?” he said.

Monica gave a start at the sound of her name and reflexively hid herself behind Elliott and Benjamin. She was already extremely shy—but tall men like Robert scared her the most.

As she fidgeted, wondering what to do, Robert—standing straight as a soldier—continued. “I was utterly impressed by your playing in our match just now.”

“Th-thanks...?” she stammered.

“And so I must ask you a question!” he continued, his eyes popping open and fixing a rather frightening gaze directly on Monica. “Would you consider marrying me so that we may continue playing chess together?!”

His voice bellowed from the pit of his stomach, loud enough to reach the far

corners of the venue.

Cyril choked on his drink as Neil yelped, “M-marriage?!” Bridget looked over, too, clearly annoyed at the moron who couldn’t read the room. Felix still wore his usual gentle smile—although there was something menacing about the gaze he set on Robert.

As for Elliott, who was the closest, his eyes opened wide, and his mouth fell open. Monica, like most of the people around them, just stared blankly, not understanding.

Finally, Benjamin broke the strange mood.

“How reprehensible!” he cried out, leaning backward and shaking his flaxen hair violently. “Love must be a more passionate melody—one that disturbs the emotions! This lacks beauty! As music, your proposal is utterly devoid of charm! In fact, I would hardly consider it music at all!”

He used his entire body to express his lament, spouting his personal theories on the nature of love.

As the situation threatened to go completely south, Elliott finally cut in to calm things down. “Uh, right. All that music stuff aside, what *are* you on about? Marrying for love is one thing, but marrying for *chess*? I’ve never even heard of such a thing.”

“I apologize,” said Robert. “I should have elaborated. I’d like to explain my reasoning, in the hope that Lady Monica will consider my proposal optimistically!” He sounded absurdly serious, his voice clear, his posture never wavering. “Lady Monica’s chess has stolen my heart. She is the first and only one of our generation to defeat me so thoroughly. If possible, I want to play chess with her more... But we attend different schools and have no other points of contact. Thus, I believe that if we become engaged, it will provide a reason to meet on weekends and during long breaks. And then we’d be able to play chess to our hearts’ content. And so I would very much like to be engaged to you, Lady Norton!”

It all made sense now. He wasn’t kidding when he’d said he wanted to marry her in order to play chess. Those were his true—and truly ridiculous—feelings.

Elliott and Benjamin, who had formed a wall for Monica, exchanged glances.

“Incredible,” murmured Elliott. “This guy is so self-centered, it’s almost refreshing.”

“No musicality at all...” Benjamin groaned. “Ahhh, not a hint of beauty...”

Robert moved around the two of them to stand in front of Monica, who had been in their shadow. She yelped, but he ignored it.

“I am the fifth son of a baron in the Kingdom of Landor,” he explained. “I will not inherit a noble title, but in time, I plan to join the Knights of Landor. Those skilled in chess have the opportunity to become officers. I can say with confidence that my future is more or less assured! My family also has no debts to speak of, and my parents are both reliable and sound! I am on good terms with my elder brothers as well, and we have three dogs! You will have no need for worry should you become my wife!”

This was moving way too fast for Monica. *I have to turn him down...*, she thought. “Monica Norton” was just a persona to begin with—she was actually one of the Seven Sages, and she’d infiltrated this place only to guard the second prince. Marriage was out of the question.

“Um, I can’t marry you,” she said. “I’m sorry!”

“Why not?” he asked. “Are you already engaged to another?”

“No, I’m not, but...”

Elliott fixed Monica with a stare that implied he thought she was being far too honest. But she simply wasn’t skilled enough to lie about such things.

As she fidgeted, Robert continued to argue his point. “If you have concerns about marrying into another kingdom, let me reassure you. I will support you in every way—through family issues, language differences, and high society alike. I want you to forget about all that and focus on chess.”

“No, I... Well, I, um... I’m sorry!”

Unable to stand there any longer, Monica made a mad dash for the hallway. Her gait was tottering and awkward, but she gave it her all.

“Lady Monica!” called Robert after her. “I’m not done yet...!”

But before he could give chase, a hand came down on each of his shoulders—Felix’s on his right and Cyril’s on his left. To those present, it would have appeared as a friendly gesture. But if you looked closely, you could see all the wrinkles forming in Robert’s shirt—proof of just how much pressure was being applied.

“Pardon me,” said Felix. “But she happens to be a member of our student council. I must ask that you run any proposals through me.”

“Your behavior is unsuited to the occasion. As a member of the student council, I cannot overlook it.”

Felix’s lips were smiling, but his eyes were not. Cyril, on the other hand, was coldly impassive, a chill spreading in the air around him.

Elliott grimaced, sure this was the start of something terrifying.

* * *

After rushing out of the room, Monica dashed down the stairs to the first floor before coming to a stop. She almost never exercised, and she could barely breathe even after such a short run. She leaned against a wall and tried to catch her breath.

That was a surprise...

Obviously, this was the first time anyone had ever proposed to her. Robert hadn’t been attracted to her looks or personality but to her skill at chess, and the only reason he’d proposed marriage was so that he could have more chances to play with her.

That would have seemed condescending to most. Anyone else would have been angry, but Monica was actually impressed at how logical it was.

Romance was just a word to her. She had nothing to do with it and didn’t really understand the concept. She was below-average in appearance, didn’t easily make friends, and could barely hold a conversation. Rather than saying they were in love with a person like her, someone asking to marry her so they could play chess together made much more sense and was much easier for Monica to understand. Regardless, she had zero intention of accepting any proposals.

But what do I do now...? she wondered. If she went back, she'd just stick out like a sore thumb. *Maybe I'll hide somewhere until the next match with Minerva's.*

As she thought it over, she caught a glimpse of something dimly flickering in front of her.

"...Huh?"

It was an arrow made of flame. There were five of them, each the thickness of a grown man's arm, hovering before her. And the moment she spoke, they flew straight at her. No normal person would have been able to dodge them.

Monica, however, instantly put up a barrier without chanting and blocked the attack.

"I knew it was you, Monica," came a voice from the stairs.

A chill ran down her spine.

Slowly, she moved her gaze up the steps until her eyes settled on her former friend—Bernie Jones—on the landing.

Light from the window behind him cast his face in shadow, but she could clearly make out the cruel smile on his lips. He leisurely stepped down the stairs, eventually arriving in front of Monica. She remained where she was, petrified.

Bernie laughed scornfully at her. "Why in the world is an honored member of the Seven Sages in a place like this, playing at being a student? Were the rumors that you'd holed up in a cabin in the mountains all lies?"

"Ah... Uh..." Monica desperately worked her mouth, trying to speak, but no words came out. She sensed her equilibrium slipping away. Her feet began to feel unsteady.

"Or maybe you're hiding your identity to get another go at school life? And at Serendia Academy, no less—the best of the best. That's a lot of money to spend on a whim. You've even surrounded yourself with men, playing like you're in love... Ha-ha! Well, you seem to be having fun."

Monica was baffled by the part about "surrounding herself with men."

Maybe... No, there was no “maybe” about it. *He means Nero and Miss Ryn...!* Apparently, Bernie had taken their overenthusiastic prank seriously.

But she couldn’t tell him why she was really here. Her mission to guard the prince was top secret.

As she continued to stare at her feet, Bernie reached out a hand and grabbed a clump of her hair—the hair Lana had so neatly styled for her.

“You seem to have changed quite a bit,” he continued. “Until I heard your name, I never would have guessed it was you. You’ve become quite the coquette—even though you can barely hold a conversation. Are you playing dress-up? Pretending to be an adult?”

“...Um...ah...”

“Seems like it’s going well. Someone from Landor even proposed to you.”

Bernie’s words were like daggers driving into Monica’s heart. And the more hurt she looked, the wider he smiled.

“Oh, I get it,” he said. “You’re pretending to be a pitiful little student to curry favor with the second prince, aren’t you? That sounds just like you—pretending you’re weak and frail, nestling up to someone... You’re like a parasite.”

This last remark truly hit home, stabbing deeper than any of the rest. Monica was already worried she wasn’t properly returning her friends’ kindnesses. And they were always doing so much for her.

She trembled, and Bernie snorted, smirking.

“What is it? Don’t tell me you aren’t even aware. Well, in that case, let me be perfectly clear.” Still holding Monica’s hair, he peered into her eyes and said, “You’re a dishonest cheat. You only ever think of yourself—you don’t care one bit about anyone else or what happens to them, do you?”

Monica was flabbergasted at the harsh, stinging insults.

Is that what Bernie thinks of me?

She’d maintained a naive hope that perhaps, if they could only speak to each other like they used to... But all that was trampled under the force of his disdain.

Bernie Jones hated Monica Everett. He wanted nothing to do with her, had nothing but contempt for her. That was the undeniable truth.

Monica felt the corners of her eyes heating up. *I can't cry*, she told herself, gritting her teeth and barely managing to swallow back a whimper. But her nose itched regardless. The despair threatened to knock her knees out from under her. She wanted to fall into a miserable, weeping lump on the floor.

"And cheats like you are destined to end up alone, ignored by everyone!"

I know, Bernie, she thought. *I know nobody would want to be around me.*

Still, Monica had been happy when Bernie reached out to help her back then. She'd desperately wanted to be a friend he could be proud of—that was all. And yet...

I should have known I had no right to want to be his friend.

Just as the tears she'd been holding in threatened to burst free, something happened.

"Stop right there!"

A girl's courageous voice echoed down the hallway.

Monica looked up in surprise and saw someone running toward her. The girl's neatly done-up hair loosened as she ran, and the hem of her skirt fluttered wildly. It was Lana.

Noticing her, Bernie immediately let go of Monica's hair and took a step back. Lana quickly inserted herself between them and glared at him.

"I couldn't hear your conversation, but I'd like to know what exactly is going on here. You're from Minerva's, correct?" she demanded.

"Oh, I apologize. Are you an academy student?"

"I believe I just asked you what was going on, *sir*. Will you not answer?" Lana paused. "...Or is it considered good manners at Minerva's to corner a girl in the hallway and make her cry?" She lifted her slender chin haughtily and continued to glare at him.

Bernie pasted on a thin smile and shrugged. "I do apologize for not

introducing myself. I am Bernie Jones, one of the players from Minerva's. Monica is an old acquaintance of mine, you see. We were just reminiscing about the past. Monica was so touched, she started sobbing."

He delivered the words smoothly, but Lana seemed completely unconvinced.

"I see...", she said. "So *he's* the one you didn't want to run into, right, Monica?" She gave Monica a light pat on the back. "I'll fix your makeup. Let's go to the powder room."

"...O-okay," said Monica, nodding.

Lana directed a refined, ladylike smile at Bernie. "You'll have to forgive me, Lord Jones. I wish to adjust my friend's makeup, so we'll be taking our leave now."

"Your friend?" repeated Bernie, his eyebrows shooting up. Then a twisted smile appeared on his lips. "You're better off without a friend like her, you know. No good will come of it. She only pretends to be helpless in order to take advantage of other people."

Monica's body shook as though she'd been lashed.

And as for Lana...

"Excuse me, what?" she said, her polite smile faltering and her forehead crinkling with anger. "Monica would never do anything of the sort."

"It's just an act. She pretends to be powerless, but on the inside, she's looking down on all of us."

Lana finally abandoned any pretense at a smile and glared at him sharply. "You must have a really terrible eye for character, then," she said. "Why don't you start by replacing those rustic, unfashionable, *stupid* eyeglasses of yours and getting a pair that actually fits on your head?"

The air froze around them. This time, Bernie was the one grimacing.

He used a finger to adjust the eyeglasses Lana had just insulted and glared right back at her. "You *will* regret this. You saw that chess game earlier, didn't you? She's smarter than anyone I've ever seen. And talented, too. But she puts on this huge act, like she's weak and can't do anything by herself... She *hides her*

true identity and sponges off everyone else.”

“Hides her true identity.” Those four words made Monica gasp in fear.

He was right. After all, she *was* hiding her identity as one of the Seven Sages. She *was* lying to Lana. She *was* relying on the goodwill of others for everything. Monica stood there, unsure of what to do.

Then Lana squeezed her hand. “Why not just be honest with yourself?” she said to Bernie, pausing for a moment. “...You’re jealous of her, aren’t you?”

Bernie froze in place. Like a mask falling from his face, his smile dissolved, revealing the anger and hatred underneath.

“One day you’ll see,” he growled. “Whether you like it or not, when it becomes clear just how much difference there is between your abilities.”

“If a friend of mine does something amazing, I brag about her to my father!” Lana shot back. “I tell him that I know someone very talented who I’m proud to call a friend! You, on the other hand, seem quite closed-minded!”

“Aha, I should have known. The gap between her genius and you, a mediocre girl with no real academic ability, must be so wide that you can’t even feel the frustration!”

The moment Bernie flashed a derisive grin at Lana, Monica cried out before she even realized what she was doing.

“Bernie!”

The other two looked at her in shock. She almost *never* raised her voice.

Her thoughts still a jumbled mess, Monica nevertheless did her best to squeeze out her words. “If you’re going to speak badly...about my friend, then... I don’t think I’ll be able...to tolerate you anymore, Bernie.”

Bernie looked taken aback. “You won’t tolerate me? So what? Do you really think anything you say can hurt me at this point?”

His words were venomous, but they had none of their previous momentum. He must have been astonished. Monica had never once lashed out at him before.

Monica slowly caught her breath and said what she'd never been able to say—what she'd always wanted to say.

"I relied on you for everything, Bernie...so I wanted to become someone amazing. Someone *you* could rely on..."

Bernie had always been the one guiding her by the hand. One day, she wanted to be a friend on equal terms, to stand side by side with him, sharing laughter and smiles.

"I wanted you to be proud of me, as your friend... That was all. I wanted you, and nobody else, to tell me I was great, that I'd worked hard..."

That dream, however, would never come true. She'd probably been wrong to wish for it at all.

"But I'm done...trying to get your praise. I won't ask for anything from you ever again."

Monica closed her eyes, like she was shutting everything out. And when they opened again, she didn't bother looking at her former friend. With a shaking hand, she grabbed Lana's and turned her back on Bernie.

Bernie reached out and tried to say something, but Lana mercilessly swatted his arm out of the way. "Men like you are the *worst*," she said, squeezing Monica's hand.

Bernie simply stood there, saying nothing.

The two girls walked past him, and once they'd gotten far enough away, Lana sniffed in satisfaction. "You managed to say what you were thinking quite eloquently, didn't you?"

Monica shyly nodded at the grinning Lana. "I think...today, I feel strong. A little anyway." She looked down at her uniform and grinned. "The corset kept my back straight. And because I'm wearing makeup, when I almost cried, I held in the tears to keep from ruining it... It's all...thanks to you, Lana."

"Don't worry," replied Lana. "I'll make you look even cuter this time."

Monica nodded, and Lana grinned and hugged her arm.

The moment Bernie Jones heard Monica's declaration, a fissure appeared in

his thoughts.

Two years ago, when he'd broken off all contact with her, he'd been sincerely relieved, or so he'd thought. Still, he'd remained curious about what the Silent Witch was up to and had read all the essays and papers she'd put out. And each time she received praise for some accomplishment, a part of Bernie's heart said this:

I was the one who once helped her and took care of her.

And I was the one who hurt her and crushed her.

The girl genius who had been chosen as a Sage had wept and begged his forgiveness, and he'd felt a sense of dark pleasure at it.

But Monica wouldn't ask anything from him anymore. She no longer expected anything. After that declaration, she'd turned her back on him.

Watching her go felt like a reversal of what had happened two years ago. Back then, Bernie had been the one to leave Monica in the dust. Now he was the one being left behind.

This is wrong. All wrong!

Monica *had* to keep thinking about him. She needed to think about him more and more, worry about him, fear him.

"I won't accept this."

He hurried down the hallway, looking for Mr. Pitman. The teacher hadn't joined in with the others at lunch, saying he preferred to skip such events. Bernie headed to the waiting room and, as expected, found him there reading a book.

"Mr. Pitman," he demanded as soon as he walked in.

Pitman looked up from his book. His eyes widened. "Oh? What's the matter, Bernie? That's one scary look on your face."

"Please make me the first player in the next match."

"Huh?! But if we change things now on such short notice... Everyone will be angry with me!"

“As long as you and a teacher from the host school sign off on it, it can be done,” said Bernie, hurriedly dragging a flustered Mr. Pitman toward the faculty room.

* * *

Lindsey Pail, a teacher at the academy, was sipping a cup of black tea in her seat in the faculty room, looking over the chess-match records from that morning. It was a rule that whenever anyone from other schools visited, there had to be at least two teachers in the faculty room at all times.

Keeping an eye on things with her was a short old man with a white beard and mustache—Macragan, the fundamental magecraft teacher.

“Do we have results from the morning’s matches?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “Unfortunately, our school lost to the University, with one victory and two defeats.”

As a team, this counted as a loss—but apparently, Monica Norton, a student in her class, had won as the academy’s first player. She’d have to go see her later and congratulate her.

Come to think of it, she thought, I remember congratulating Lady Claudia Ashley, too. She looked really unhappy about it.

As she reminisced on the events of a year ago, Macragan took a peek at the match records over her shoulder. “Serendia Academy lost?” he muttered. “What a shame.”

“Yes, but Lady Monica Norton played a very good game.”

“Hmm?” said Macragan. “So she has a talent for chess as well. I see, I see.”

As well?

Just as Lindsey was about to ask him what he meant, there was a knock at the faculty-room door, and in came a blond boy wearing the uniform for Minerva’s. Chasing after him was a man who appeared to be his teacher.

The boy looked around the faculty room and spotted Macragan. His face lit up. “Mr. Macragan! It’s so good to see you!”

“Hrm? Who are you?” Macragan, whose eyes were bad, tilted his head in

confusion.

With a troubled expression, the teacher from Minerva's whispered into the boy's ear, "Bernie, are you acquainted with this elderly man?"

"Mr. Pitman, please remain quiet for a moment," said the boy, silencing his own teacher and fixing his tilted glasses. "I'm Bernie Jones, a player for Minerva's at the chess competition. Mr. Macragan, you taught my practical courses when you were still at Minerva's."

"Jones? Oh yes, I remember. You were good friends with Everett—"

"I'd like a Serendia Academy signature as soon as possible," said the boy, interrupting him. "It's about the chess competition." He thrust a paper toward the elderly teacher.

Macragan stroked his beard. "Will mine suffice?"

"Yes," replied the boy. "Apparently, it can be any teacher from the host school."

"Hmm," said Macragan, picking up the feather pen on his desk. Then, with a shaky hand, he signed the blank line. "Does that work? It's not outside the box, is it?"

"No, it's perfect. I'll go submit this to Professor Boyd."

"Hmm. I see. Say hello to him for me, will you?"

"I will!" said the boy with a refined smile and a nod.

After easily procuring Macragan's signature, Bernie chuckled to himself. Now he could be the first player in the following match—and play against Monica.

I won't let her get away with ignoring me.

He gripped the paper and hurried back to the competition room.

Pitman was mumbling something like, "Is this okay? I won't get in trouble, right?" but Bernie couldn't care less about him.

He *needed* Monica Everett to remain in his thrall—not only in the past but in the future as well. For all eternity.



CHAPTER 5

Disguised Malice

Once Lana had refreshed her makeup, Monica returned to the competition room. Something strange had happened with the audience seating while she was away. All the spectators were using the benches prepared by the academy save for one, who was sitting with his legs folded under him on the floor. It was Robert Winkel, the boy who had proposed to her in order to play chess and been summarily turned down. He was between the student council's bench and the faculty's bench with a piece of paper stuck to his back that read, *"Thinking about what I've done."*

Seated on the council's bench, Felix was smiling, while Cyril was dispersing cold air, his arms folded across his chest. Meanwhile, among the faculty, Mr. Redding was staring hard at Robert, deep creases in his brow.

Monica, speechless, hesitated to go anywhere near them until Robert noticed her and raised his voice, still sitting on the floor. "Lady Monica! When this match is over, please hear me out once more—"

Clearly having failed to learn his lesson, Robert was interrupted by Mr. Redding's fist coming down on his head. As the boy rubbed at the area of impact, Felix and Cyril addressed him coldly.

"Winkel, I don't believe I've given you permission to speak yet."

"Please refrain from any actions that may disturb the players before their games."

There seemed to be a peculiarly uncomfortable aura surrounding Robert, and Monica found herself a little frightened by it. Flustered, she was wondering what to do when Elliott and Benjamin beckoned to her from the player seating. Seeing her chance, she rushed over.

"U-um, that seat there...", she stammered.

"Pretend you don't see it," said Elliott. "And do not, under any circumstances, ask what happened while you were out of the room. I saw nothing."

Understand? I'll say it again. *I saw nothing.*"

"Ahhh, to think our student council president, said to be so gentle and mild-mannered, would do something so cruel..." said Benjamin. "I swear I heard music—specifically from Georg Altmeier's fifth requiem expressing divine punishment and the third movement therein: 'God's Anger Falleth Upon Us'!"

Monica wasn't sure what he was talking about, but apparently, something terrifying had happened. Deciding ignorance was bliss, she nodded at Elliott to indicate she'd understood him.

The players from Minerva's still hadn't arrived, it seemed; none of the students or their teacher was anywhere to be found. Ultimately, they made it to their seats with only seconds to spare before the match.

Standing at their head was Bernie Jones. Monica was pretty sure he'd been their anchor, but he passed by Elliott, instead taking a seat across from her.

Elliott arched an eyebrow and looked at him. "Hey, what's this? That's not your seat. Aren't you the anchor?"

"I submitted a request to change places," replied Bernie. "This seat is correct."

If Bernie had moved up to the first position, that meant he viewed Monica as a powerful opponent—but it was also an insult to Elliott as Serendia Academy's anchor.

Withdrawing his usual flippant smile, Elliott narrowed his drooping eyes at Bernie. "That's rather tasteless of you."

"I'm fully aware of how rude I'm being," answered Bernie. "But this is something on which I cannot yield under any circumstances."

The other two players from Minerva's and their teacher wore troubled expressions, and Elliott surmised the idea for the change had come directly from Bernie.

Monica was surprised, but not disturbed. Strangely enough, her heart was calm. Before, she'd been terrified of facing Bernie; now she wasn't scared in the slightest.

The moment she'd given up on it all—on gaining his forgiveness, his friendship, his acknowledgment—one of the wedges driven into Monica's heart had vanished.

Bernie turned away from Elliott and set his gaze on Monica. His eyes said it all: *Look at me. Pay attention to me...*

But his persistence no longer reached Monica's heart. The only thing on her mind as she sat at the chessboard was the game ahead. There was no room for Bernie.

"Let's have a good game."

"Yes."

Bernie went first, moving one of his pieces. Monica followed immediately.

As it turned out, his play style was very aggressive. She could feel his determination to win at all costs—no matter what pieces he had to sacrifice.

And Monica would meet him head-on and crush him.

He was a talented player—worthy of being the anchor for Minerva's. But his strength was brittle. Monica destroyed every one of his plans as if to underscore the fact that all his sacrifices, all his groundwork, all his tactics were for nothing.

She moved with the same unfeeling efficiency as when she'd shot those pterodragons in their foreheads.

I know you can do it, Monica...!

Lana didn't know much about chess, so looking at the broadcasting board, she couldn't tell which player was winning. But as she held her breath and continued to watch, Claudia muttered something from beside her.

"...She's merciless."

Just how many people could make Claudia, renowned for her scathing critiques, describe them as "merciless"?

Looking at the board, Glenn—as clueless about chess as Lana—asked Neil, "So, uh, does it look like Monica might win?"

“No,” said Neil with a shake of his head, face tense. *“She’s already won.”*

“Huh?” said Glenn, his eyes going wide.

Nobody could blame him for being surprised—not much time had passed since the game’s start, after all.

“If she’s already won, then why is the game still going?” asked Glenn.

“Lady Norton’s victory is essentially assured at this stage,” explained Neil. “But her opponent doesn’t want to admit it. I guess you could say he’s floundering...”

Cyril and Claudia nodded. “He’ll have a difficult time even bringing things to a stalemate at this rate,” pointed out Cyril.

“Yes,” said Claudia. “And he demoted himself from anchor to first player, so if he loses immediately, his reputation will be in tatters. I’d say he’s desperate and trying to stall for time.”

“Yikes,” said Glenn, looking at Bernie with pity in his eyes.

“Merciless” described Monica’s game perfectly.

Lana folded her arms and sniffed proudly. “That’s right. He’ll find Monica a little different today.”

“...Why are *you* bragging about it?” asked Claudia languidly.

Lana lifted her chin and replied, “Why shouldn’t I be proud of my friend doing something amazing? It makes me happy when people praise the things and people I like. So yes, I’m bragging.”

Just then, Monica quietly declared checkmate.

* * *

“Checkmate.”

Bernie broke down into a trembling mess at Monica’s declaration, one hand pushing his bangs, mussing them up. Monica, however, simply stared emotionlessly down at the game board. The only things in her eyes were the black and white pieces—and not a hint of him.

In truth, he’d always known. Monica was a bona fide genius, while he was just

a regular person who happened to be slightly more talented than others. There was a tall, thick wall between them that he'd never be able to break through or surmount.

"...Damn it!" he muttered, standing up from his chair with a clatter and bursting out of the room.

Monica didn't follow him or call out to him. In fact, she didn't even look at him. Her eyes remained glued to the board until the moment he vanished from the room.

This was reality.

Damn it, damn it, damn it!

Back in the waiting room, Bernie slammed a fist into the wall. His conduct was rude and unrefined, unworthy of a son of Count Ambard. He knew that. But he had to vent his anger somehow.

There was a reserved knock at the door.

"Errr, Bernie?" came the voice of his teacher. Apparently, he'd followed him all the way here from the competition room.

"Hey," he continued. "I know you're frustrated because you lost, but why don't we head back now? We still need to give our official greetings to everyone at the end."

"...I'm sorry," said Bernie stiffly. "Just give me a few minutes. I'll go back."

Pitman scratched his head, troubled. "Hmm. If you're late, that teacher with the scary face will probably glare at me..."

The "teacher with the scary face" was probably Professor Boyd of Serendia Academy. And Pitman was right—one glare from that terrifying, warrior of a man and anyone would feel like begging for their life.

...Huh? Suddenly, Bernie felt like something wasn't adding up.

Actually, the feeling wasn't sudden; something had been off for a while. He'd just been so excited earlier that he hadn't noticed. But now that he thought back, his exchange with Pitman in the faculty room didn't make sense, either.

Suppressing his anger toward Monica for the moment, Bernie turned to Pitman. “Mr. Pitman, once we return to Minerva’s, will you still teach me chess?”

“Sure. I would be glad to.”

His words solidified Bernie’s suspicions. He felt an awful chill run up his spine but didn’t let it show. Taking a few steps back, he hesitantly asked, “...*Who are you?*”

Pitman’s eyes widened in confusion—and a bit of shock crept into that boring scholar’s face of his. “I... Who am I? I’m Eugene Pitman. A teacher at Minerva’s —”

“Mr. Pitman may be our chess-club supervisor, but he’s not very good at the game,” interrupted Bernie. “He loves it, don’t get me wrong—but he’s always saying there’s nothing he can teach us.”

“Oh, come on. Doesn’t every teacher want to look good in front of his students once in a while?”

“Then what subject *do* you teach? In which field of magecraft is your specialty?”

Pitman fell silent at the barrage of questions.

The man was a former research student at Minerva’s who had become a teacher. There was no way he wouldn’t recognize William Macragan, the Waterbite Mage. And yet in the faculty room, *this* man had acted like Macragan was a stranger.

The same went for Professor Boyd. Pitman had been the supervisor for a number of chess competitions in the past. It was strange he’d suddenly forget the professor’s name.

Eventually, Bernie—readying himself for a fight—said, “...I’ll ask you again. Who are you?”

The feckless grin fell off Pitman’s face as his lips turned upward, forming an arc.

Eugene Pitman was a professor of ranged magecraft and the supervisor of the

chess club. He was a mild-mannered man, if a bit indecisive, and a scholar.

But this Pitman—or whoever was borrowing his shape—let a cruel smile like a big crescent moon spread across his face.

“Well, well,” said the man. “The boys and girls at Minerva’s really are smart, aren’t they?”

His voice was clearly different from Pitman’s now. It was low for a woman’s but considerably high-pitched for a man’s. It was like concentrated honey—sweet and sticky, a cloying sort of voice.

Pitman—or rather, the fake Pitman—opened his mouth and began to chant. Bernie didn’t need to hear much of it to know the man was casting a spell.

He’s a mage! Bernie immediately used an abbreviated chant to produce ten arrows made of lightning. The golden arrows crackled and popped as they moved to surround the fake Pitman. And with a wag of his finger, the arrows flew toward the man.

Just then, Bernie’s opponent finished his chant. *But if his attack is only beginning now, then mine will land first!* The lightning arrows stabbed into the fake Pitman’s body. *That should paralyze him,* thought Bernie.

However...

“Oh my, that stings... Like I’ve been pricked by needles,” said the false Pitman, swinging his arm and causing the arrows to dissipate.

Did I lower their strength too much trying to take him alive? wondered Bernie, making use of another abbreviated chant to fire the spell again with more power. These arrows were strong enough to knock the man out completely if they hit—but the fake Pitman swung his arm again, batting them all away.

Bernie couldn’t believe his eyes. *He parried an attack spell with his bare hands?*

He thought at first the man had used a defensive barrier, but judging by the way his attacks were hitting, it didn’t seem like any barrier Bernie was aware of.

Then what spell *had* the man used? Bernie stared, his eyes full of suspicion—then he gasped as the man began to change shape before him. Something

bluish appeared on the false Pitman's face. Looking more closely, it wasn't just on his face but his neck and hands, too. It appeared all over his exposed skin, in fact—blue scales.

“Oh! Would this be your first time witnessing dragonshifting magecraft?”

“...Dragonshifting?” Bernie had never seen or heard of such a thing.

Nevertheless, he racked his brain, using all his knowledge to try and pin down what, exactly, he was seeing. It had very obviously induced a physical transformation. Magecraft that strengthened or changed the body was called body-manipulation magecraft. Because of its high risk of mana contamination, it was forbidden throughout the world. In recent years, however, one nation had reopened research on the topic.

That nation was the empire to the east of the Kingdom of Ridill.

“Are you from the Schwargald Empire?” demanded Bernie.

The fake Pitman smiled without answering.

If a mage from the Empire had swapped places with Pitman and infiltrated Serendia Academy, he was likely here to either assassinate or kidnap someone important. And the only person who fit that profile—who was guaranteed to appear at the chess competition—was...

He's after Prince Felix!

Bernie couldn't overlook an intruder bent on harming the second prince. He had to stop this imperial mage's scheme, whatever it took.

Bernie began to chant, intending to use the most powerful spell in his arsenal, but the imperial mage launched into a sliding dash. He was fast. The man's impossibly strong legs propelled him over to Bernie in the blink of an eye. He grabbed the boy's neck with one hand, easily lifting him into the air.

“Gah...hah!”

The false Pitman was a slender man of middling height—Bernie couldn't imagine he had the strength to lift a person with only one hand. But the structure of the hand around Bernie's neck was warped. His nails were longer, sharper. The arm itself rippled with unnatural muscle. Apparently, his skin

wasn't the only thing that had changed.

Scales that could block magical attacks, combined with Herculean strength... *I see*, thought Bernie. *Dragonshifting indeed.*

He flailed his legs and dug his nails into the arm gripping his neck, but it wouldn't budge. And worst of all, he couldn't chant in this situation.

He had to at least warn someone. The Eugene Pitman at Serendia was an imperial mage in disguise, using dangerous body-manipulation magecraft!

"Bernie?!"

Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him. He looked around using only his eyes to find Monica standing in the doorway.

The imperial mage swore, then began quick-chanting a spell. "Drown and die!"

Immediately, the ground at Monica's feet began to glow. Then a sphere of water appeared, enclosing her. Trapped by the bubble, Monica's face warped in pain. Her mouth opened and closed pointlessly.

The imperial mage sighed, irritated by the string of interruptions. "I can't have you screaming, you see. I'm sorry, young lady, but I need you to stay in there until you drown."

Monica struggled inside the sphere of water, bubbles spurting from her mouth. The sphere used a type of powerful internal barrier, and it was very difficult to escape once inside it. Even mages, unable to chant underwater, would have no choice but to wait for death.

Mages who *needed* to chant, that is.

There was a high-pitched noise like the sound of glass breaking. The imperial mage, confused, turned around—but by then, the watery barrier enclosing Monica was already covered in cracks, letting the water drain out.

"Impossible!" exclaimed the fake Pitman as the barrier completely burst, spraying water everywhere and releasing Monica to the floor.

The girl coughed and coughed but managed to look up and face the imperial mage squarely. Behind her wet, messy bangs, her light-brown eyes glowed with

just a hint of green.

Wind created from mana blustered up around her. That wind then formed an invisible bullet that proceeded to strike the imperial mage right between his eyes.

“Gahhh, agh?!”

The one weakness of dragons, which were otherwise highly resistant to magecraft, was the spot between their eyes—and apparently, the same rule applied to those using dragonshifting magecraft.

The blow to his brow concussed the imperial mage. His eyes rolled up, and he fell over backward. Bernie, his neck freed from the mage’s grasp, fell to the floor, gasping for air.

“Bernie... A-are you all right?!”

He looked up to see Monica staring down at him, worry on her face. He sat and fixed his crooked glasses.

“It’s nothing. More importantly, do you have any idea what’s going on—?”

Before he could finish, he heard a tapping noise at the window. He looked over to see a small yellow bird perched outside the glass. Monica ran over and opened the window, letting the bird fly into the room. A moment later, it transformed into a person.

This person was someone Bernie recognized. It was the blond man with the far-too-formal clothes. Apparently, he hadn’t been a man at all but a spirit.

“You have dealt with the assassin wonderfully, Silent Witch.”

“Miss Ryn, thank you for telling me that Bernie was in danger.” Monica bowed to the blond spirit, then looked down at the imperial mage. “This person may have been a decoy, so please continue to remain alert. And can you ask Nero to stay near the prince at all times, too?”

“At once.”

After hearing Monica talk to the spirit, Bernie finally understood why she was here.

She was an extremely shy person. She never would have enrolled in Serendia Academy of her own volition. He surmised she was on a mission to protect the second prince—a top secret one, no doubt. A mission that had *demand*ed she enroll here.

Monica wrung out her dripping wet skirt, then picked her glasses off the floor and put them in her pocket.

The soaking wet girl with disheveled hair reminded him a lot of Everett the Mute back at Minerva's, when her classmates had bullied her. She'd been sniffing and sobbing back then. But she was different now.

Without shedding a single tear, she looked at Bernie. "Um, Bernie?"

"Yes?" he replied gruffly.

Monica smiled, a tinge of loneliness to her expression. "It looks like...this is the end of my fake life at the academy."

This attempted assassination would probably blow up into a huge incident. The real Eugene Pitman had probably been killed when the imperial mage took his place. With a teacher from Minerva's as the victim, it would be impossible to cover up. Monica's identity as the one who had captured him would soon be known far and wide, forcing her to leave the academy.

Bernie could hear footsteps in the distance—probably someone coming to check the waiting room.

Ugh, fine! Without taking the time to think it over, Bernie called out. "Have that spirit turn back into a bird. Quickly!"

"Huh? Um, ummm..."

As Monica stood there at a loss, not understanding his instruction, the spirit quickly returned to bird form. Bernie then hid the bird behind a shelf. Just as he finished, two people entered the waiting room.

They were both members of the academy's student council—Cyril Ashley and Neil Clay Maywood.

"What's all this?!" demanded Cyril.

"Oh no, oh no! Are you okay, Lady Norton?! You're soaking wet!" cried Neil.

The room was a mess. Pitman was on the floor with his eyes rolled back in his head, Bernie had a bruise on his neck, and Monica was dripping wet. Something strange had clearly happened here.

Cyril took off his jacket and put it around Monica's shoulders, then asked Bernie, "Bernie Jones of Minerva's, explain those wounds." He stared at the boy dubiously.

The situation made it look a lot like Bernie had harmed Pitman and Monica. He couldn't blame them for assuming as much. With an absolutely calm demeanor, he answered clearly and confidently.

"It appears someone has switched places with Eugene Pitman. When I saw through the disguise, he attacked me, and I fought him off. Lady Monica Norton happened to come into the waiting room at that very moment and got caught up in the fight."

Cyril and Neil were speechless at Bernie's admission. Bernie glanced down at the mage who had turned himself into Pitman.

"This mage was using body-manipulation magecraft," he explained. "It's possible he's from the Empire."

The fact that someone had taken the place of a professor from Minerva's and infiltrated Serendia Academy was troubling enough by itself. Add other nations into the mix, and the situation became much graver.

Realizing this, Cyril's expression grew serious. Addressing Neil, he said, "I'll keep watch over the scene and get the details from Bernie Jones. You inform the prince and the teachers."

"Yes, sir!"

"And bring Accountant Norton to the infirmary while you're at it. I believe several of her friends were in the audience. Have them stay with her."

Neil nodded, then asked Monica if she could stand.

Monica, still wearing Cyril's jacket, glanced over at Bernie.

"Um, Bernie, I..." Her eyes seemed to be asking him why he'd covered for her.

Bernie gave her one of his usual sardonic smiles, fixed his glasses with a

finger, and said, “You’d better keep thanking me for the rest of your life.”

Cyril and Neil looked confused—they didn’t understand the true meaning behind his words. But Monica gave Bernie a deep bow, then left the waiting room with Neil.



MINERVA'S MAGE TRAINING INSTITUTION
SECOND-YEAR

Bernie Jones

* * *

The contest between Serendia Academy and Minerva's saw a win for Monica in the first match and a win for Minerva's in the second. Now only the anchors remained to decide which school would be victorious.

That final game would end soon, but Lana was much more concerned about Monica than the chess. After losing to her friend, Bernie Jones had run out of the room. Eventually, Monica had quietly left as well—probably to go after him.

Lana was worried that Bernie might take his anger out on her or say terrible things to her again. She knew Cyril and Neil had gone to check the waiting room, so she doubted much would happen, but she couldn't shake the bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Eventually, Neil returned. Instead of going back to his seat, though, he quickly walked over to Felix and whispered something in his ear.

Is Vice President Ashley not with him? wondered Lana. The fact that Cyril wasn't here and the grim expression on Neil's face stirred her anxiety even more.

Just then, the third match ended. Elliott Howard had won, meaning so had Serendia, with two victories and one defeat. A short break would follow, after which the University would play against Minerva's.

But just then, Felix stood up and made an announcement.

"I apologize for the sudden interruption so soon after the end of the match. However, there's something I need everyone to hear." His usual smile was gone. "I've received word of an intruder in the academy."

Lana was stunned speechless. Everyone else was just as surprised—and they all looked uneasy.

To calm them down, Felix softened his tone a little bit. "There is no need for alarm. The intruder has already been captured, and security guards are on standby outside this room. But just to be sure, I'd like to have them patrol the campus, so would everyone please stay here for the time being?"

The room erupted into chatter, but nobody panicked—the prince had said there were security guards just outside the door, after all.

Wait a minute, thought Lana. *What about Monica? She's not here. What happened to her?*

Just as she was about to ask, someone quietly came over to where she was seated—Neil.

“Do you have a moment?” he asked, beckoning to Lana, Claudia, and Glenn before lowering his voice and whispering, “Lady Norton was at the scene of the intruder’s capture.”

He then covered Glenn’s mouth just before the other boy shouted in surprise. It seemed he was becoming quite good at handling him.

“Shhh,” he continued. “Fortunately, she isn’t injured, but she’s probably experiencing some shock... Would you all go and be with her?”

“Where is she now?” asked Lana immediately.

Neil spoke softly so that nobody else would hear. “The infirmary.”

And so Lana, Claudia, and Glenn snuck out of the room at Neil’s request and headed for the infirmary with security guards to escort them.

“Monica, are you in there? We’re coming in, okay?”

When they knocked on the infirmary door and peered inside, in place of the resident nurse, they found Monica sitting patiently in a chair...

...wearing nothing but a man’s jacket over her underwear.

Lana wasted no time tackling Glenn and pushing him out of the room, leaving only her and Claudia inside, before shoving the door closed.

“What was that for?!” the boy shouted from the hallway, but he wasn’t important right now.

Monica didn’t seem particularly fazed by Glenn seeing her in her underwear.

“Oh, hi, Lana,” she said, remaining seated as she calmly looked up at her.

Lana strode over to her friend and asked, her voice shaking, “Whose jacket is that?”

“Um, Lord Cyril let me borrow it...”

Lana buried her face in her hands and lifted her head toward the ceiling. "I'd always thought better of Vice President Ashley!"

"L-Lana...?" stammered Monica.

"And how could he leave a girl here in a state like this?!" wailed Lana.

Monica lowered her gaze, unsure of what to do.

The only calm one in the room, Claudia glanced at Monica's dripping wet uniform hanging in the corner and murmured, "That idiot's not the type. I doubt he has the guts."

"But isn't that the only assumption you can make here?!" demanded Lana, her eyes bloodshot.

Claudia pointed to the corner of the room, where Monica's uniform hung. Lana looked at it, then blinked.

"Um, it was very cold because my uniform was wet, so I took it off to dry it," Monica murmured. "But I didn't know how to take the corset off by myself, so... I'm glad you came along, Lana."

"....."

Lana placed her hands on Monica's shoulders and gave her a serious look. "Then you're not injured?"

"No."

"And it doesn't hurt anywhere?"

"No." Monica shook her head.

Lana fell to the floor and heaved a sigh of relief.

After Lana helped her undo the corset, Monica removed her soaked-through underwear and changed into a simple set of pajamas she had borrowed from the infirmary. To tell the truth, she'd been very, very cold, so she grabbed a thin blanket from the bed and wrapped it around herself as well.

Claudia silently held out a teacup. Apparently, she'd prepared her a warm drink. Monica gratefully took it and sipped its contents before her face twisted into a grimace.

“I-it’th so thpithy... Oof...”

“It has ginger, red pepper, and citrus peel in it. It’ll warm you up.”

The mixture had been made specifically to provide warmth, without much attention to taste. But Claudia was right—as Monica sipped at it, she felt heat permeating her body. She breathed a sigh.

Glenn, who had eventually been allowed back into the room, asked her, “So what happened anyway? The president said something about an intruder showing up.”

Monica hesitated for a moment over how much to tell them. Apparently, the people at the chess competition had been informed of the intruder. Sooner or later, whatever info Monica had would be the subject of rumors.

I should probably keep quiet about the imperial mage impersonating a teacher from Minerva’s, she thought.

Thanks to Bernie’s quick thinking, everyone now considered Monica a mere victim who had just happened onto the scene. The intruder probably hadn’t realized she’d attacked him with uncharmed magecraft, so as long as she and Bernie got their stories straight, she’d be able to go on with her life at the academy.

But there was one thing she didn’t understand. *Why did Bernie cover for me...?* He’d been so hateful toward her and mocked her for pretending to be a student. But in the end, he’d lied to protect her identity.

“You’d better keep thanking me for the rest of your life,” he’d said, smiling sardonically.

But I was already grateful, thought Monica. *Ever since we first met. I just don’t get it...*

She sighed to herself, then began to fumble through an explanation.

“Um, so Bernie...I followed Minerva’s anchor into the waiting room, and he was fighting the intruder there...”

“I see,” said Glenn. “And then you got wrapped up in it, yeah? Your clothes are soaked, too. Was it water magecraft or something?”

“Mm-hmm. It was a spell that locked you up in a water bubble.”

When Monica explained that the spell was why her uniform had gotten soaked, Claudia stared at her closely, her expression unreadable.

“Poisoned at the tea party, almost hit by falling lumber, and now coincidentally encountering an intruder... Your life here has been nothing if not *fulfilling*,” she commented.

Monica groaned. Poisoning at the tea party aside, the other incidents were all related to attempts on Felix’s life. As his bodyguard, it was only natural she had been there at the time. But anyone else would be convinced she had terrible luck.

Actually, her luck...*wasn’t* that great. Pretty bad, in fact. No—as far as she could figure, it was absolutely terrible.

As she reflected on her misfortune, Glenn, kicking his legs out rudely as he sat, asked, “Think they’ll call off the chess contest? Even after you won and everything.”

Lana nodded. “That would be appropriate. This is all going to blow up pretty quickly.”

“Then will the school festival get canceled, too?” wondered Glenn aloud.

“With an incident like this, I don’t think there’s much of a choice...”

Lana seemed really down in the dumps. She had been in charge of the costumes for the festival play. Nobody could blame her. Everyone had been looking forward to it. Even Glenn’s shoulders were drooping with disappointment.

But surprisingly, it was Claudia who contradicted them.

“They’ll go through with it,” she said—but not in an encouraging tone. Her face was as gloomy as always, and she spoke as though she was delivering unfortunate news.

Dubious, Lana objected. “Isn’t Prince Felix’s safety their top priority? Why wouldn’t they cancel it?”

It was a reasonable question. But Claudia’s face took on an exhausted color,

like explaining this was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Duke Clockford will insist on it,” she said.

Duke Clockford—a prominent noble and Felix’s maternal grandfather. Everyone knew Serendia Academy was under his control. But why would the duke force the school festival to proceed, even if it meant neglecting the safety of the second prince, who was under his guardianship?

Nervously, Monica asked Claudia a question. “Um, Duke Clockford backs the prince, right? Wouldn’t he be concerned for his safety...?”

“Duke Clockford isn’t like that,” Claudia told her in a low voice.

Monica had never met the duke in person before and knew of him only through rumor. According to Louis, he was a brutally ambitious man who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

“They’ll strengthen security,” continued Claudia, “but the school festival is sure to go forward. It’s meant to serve as the second prince’s debut, and Duke Clockford will see that as more important than his safety.”

If the duke was that set on securing the prince’s debut, it must mean he wanted him on the throne no matter what. If the prince ascended, the duke would find his authority even more secure than it was now. He would be even more powerful than the king.

“...And the second prince won’t refuse, either,” said Claudia. “Because he’s the duke’s puppet.”

For some reason, that sent a chill down Monica’s spine. The second prince was Duke Clockford’s puppet. Casey had said the same thing.

But Monica just couldn’t bring herself to accept that *puppet* was the right term for Felix.

I have a bad feeling about this..., she thought, an odd sense of foreboding rising within her as she took another sip from her cup.



CHAPTER 6

To Engrave My Name in History

The day after the intruder incident at the chess competition, a man visited Serendia Academy. He had blond hair speckled with gray, and he wore elegant, refined clothing. A little past sixty, he was nonetheless slender with perfect posture, and his well-defined features made it clear he'd been extremely attractive in his prime.

The headmaster was currently meeting with him in the reception room, and suffering from the worst stomachache of his life.

The guest's name was Darius Nightray. He was the maternal grandfather of Second Prince Felix Arc Ridill and the noble with the greatest authority in the kingdom—Duke Clockford himself.

At the chess competition the day before, someone impersonating a teacher from another school had infiltrated Serendia Academy. It was a total mess, considering they'd only recently allowed robbers pretending to be with the Abbott Company onto school grounds. Criticism of the academy's security was unavoidable.

The headmaster trembled, stealing a glance at Duke Clockford's face. The duke was older than him, and while some white had begun to creep into his light-blond hair, time had not dulled or exhausted him. The headmaster had heard his good looks as a young man had driven many a noblewoman wild, and his facial features were sharp and symmetrical, like an aged blade that had lost none of its sharpness to rust.

He was stern, and he was cold. Every noble in the Kingdom of Ridill knew of Duke Clockford's shrewdness.

"I've heard the reports."

The moment the duke's mouth opened, the air in the room seemed to grow heavier. The intimidation was like a weight pressing down on the headmaster's shoulders. His balled fists shook in his lap.

“Regarding the school festival...,” said the duke.

“The prince’s safety is our top priority, of course,” explained the headmaster quickly. “We will cancel—!”

“No. Carry it out,” commanded the duke, interrupting.

The headmaster wasn’t about to argue with him. One did not question the duke. Many had been run out of the country simply for voicing doubt about his orders.

The headmaster stifled any internal misgivings and answered immediately. “We will strengthen security and carry it out. You have my word!”

“Very well.”

As the duke nodded, there was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” came the response—not from the headmaster but from the duke, clearly demonstrating which one of them was in control.

“Please excuse me.” Entering the room was the duke’s grandson—the kingdom’s second prince, Felix Arc Ridill.

His face was mild, as always, with just a hint of apology as he bowed to the duke.

“I am happy to see you again, Grandfather,” said the prince sincerely. “And I’m terribly sorry for causing you concern.”

His grandfather responded in a quiet voice. “Are you hurt?”

“No. It’s very reassuring that you’ve come to check on me. Thank you—I know you must be quite busy.”

When Felix was done politely expressing his gratitude, Duke Clockford nodded back to him without a word.

The exchange had been brief, but the headmaster privately took solace in the knowledge that the duke had clearly come all this way out of love for his grandson. The headmaster had been sweating after receiving the order to go ahead with the school festival, but the duke must have his reasons.

Oh, I know, he thought. Duke Clockford must have really been looking forward

to seeing his precious grandson in the festival! That's why he ordered me to go ahead with it!

As the headmaster convinced himself of this, Duke Clockford glanced back over to him. "I'd like to talk with Felix for a while."

The duke was asking him to leave, and the headmaster immediately stood to excuse himself from the room. He may have been the headmaster of the academy, but when Duke Clockford told you to get lost, you did as you were told.

Once the headmaster was gone, Duke Clockford's face warped ever so slightly—into something unpleasant and hateful.

"A disgrace," he spat lowly.

Felix's expression didn't waver, but it was no longer the gentle one from earlier—his blue eyes like glowing beads of glass now looked upon the duke without any emotion whatsoever, like a puppet.

"You've been neglectful, not cautious enough of outsiders. That neglect directly led to this incident."

"If I might have a word, Serendia Academy has long maintained a close relationship with both Minerva's and the University. I believe being overly cautious would equate to rude—"

"Do *not* talk back to me," interrupted the duke, ice in his voice. "Lords have been invited to the school festival. It *will* succeed. And you will show that rabble the worth of Felix Arc Ridill—and the might and authority of Duke Clockford."

The inheritance decision was upon them. In the near future, one of the king's three sons would be named his heir. Felix needed to use this festival to show what he was made of.

Understanding the duke's implications, Felix quietly bent at the waist. Then, in a voice devoid of emotion, he answered.

"It will be done, Your Excellency."

* * *

The day after the chess competition would have normally been a day off, but

the student council assembled anyway. The meeting would probably include an announcement about how things were to be handled following the incident with the intruder.

Sitting snugly in her seat in the council room, Monica glanced around. Only Felix, the president, was missing. Apparently, the prince was currently in talks with teachers regarding the advisability of holding the school festival. The other council members were waiting for the results.

Lady Claudia said the festival would go forward..., thought Monica, though it didn't make much sense to her. Under normal circumstances, such an event would almost certainly be canceled or postponed.

She and the other student council members all waited in their chairs, lost in thought. A little less than an hour passed before the door finally opened.

"Hey, everyone," Felix called out as he entered the room. "Sorry for making you wait so long."

"Sir!" Cyril rose from his chair with a clatter.

Elliott, resting his chin in his hand, grinned wryly and cast a sidelong glance at the prince. "Either way," he said. "We're going to hold it like nothing happened, right?"

"You catch on quickly," responded Felix with his usual calm demeanor before taking his own seat and looking around the room. "First of all, it seems the intruder at yesterday's chess competition has not been very cooperative with our investigation. It will likely take some time before we can wring all the information we want out of him—his employer, his objective, and the location of the real Mr. Pitman."

There was one thing in particular Monica had been curious about when it came to the intruder: How had the man seemed so much like the real Eugene Pitman that none of the students from Minerva's, including Bernie, realized immediately that he was a fake? He hadn't put anything on his face or stuck any cotton into his oral cavity to adjust his silhouette or bone structure.

Was he just eerily similar to the real Eugene Pitman to begin with? wondered Monica, perplexed. *That seems awfully convenient...*

“The school festival will proceed as planned,” Felix continued. “However, we’ll need to take a look at our security detail and strengthen it. I’ll handle the review of our plans. I want the rest of you to continue preparing for the event as you have been.”

“Sir, I will help with the review,” offered Cyril immediately.

The prince shook his head. “This is our last day off before the festival. Our workload is going to ramp up tomorrow, so I want you all to get a good rest today.” He looked at Cyril and added with a smile, “That’s an order.”

Cyril looked anguished to receive such an order from his esteemed prince. To him, not being able to help Felix must have been much more painful than taking on more work.

He frowned and gritted his teeth. “...Understood, sir,” he said eventually. “I’ll rest for today so that I can dedicate my full efforts to aiding you tomorrow.” Then he groaned, trembling. “As for all your work from tomorrow onward, I will —”

“There’s no need to take things so seriously,” interrupted Felix. “My work has been going smoothly.”

“Sir, if anything happens, anything, please don’t hesitate to call on me. I swear that I shall—”

“I’ll be fine. We’ve increased security starting today, after all.”

Once Felix managed to soothe Cyril into reluctant agreement, they were all dismissed for the day.

As the rest of them left the student council room, Cyril took an awful long time cleaning up the papers on his desk, fidgeting and glancing at Felix as he did so. Monica needed to tell him something, so she waited for him outside in the hallway. She wanted to return the jacket he’d lent her during the chess competition.

“Thank you for lending me your jacket yesterday, thank you for lending me your jacket yesterday, thank you for...”

As she quietly muttered words of gratitude to herself, practicing to make sure

she wouldn't fumble them, a little bird fluttered in from the window. The creature, covered in vivid golden feathers, came to a stop on Monica's shoulder. Monica, however, was so preoccupied with practicing her thanks that she didn't even notice.

"Silent Witch?"

"Hyah-what?!" yelled Monica at the sudden voice in her ear. She looked over at the bird on her shoulder—Ryn. If Ryn was risking talking to her inside the school building, it must have been urgent. Monica made sure nobody was around, then asked, "Is this about yesterday?"

"No. I've come on other business today."

There's other business? thought Monica, caught off guard.

"_____ would like to invite the Silent Witch to her estate," Ryn said in a whisper.

"...Huh?"

Monica's eyes widened at the unexpected name. Just then, she heard footsteps on the other side of the door. Cyril had probably given up and was about to leave.

"I'll come get you later," said Ryn before quickly flying back out the window.

Not a moment after, the door opened, and Cyril came out. When he noticed Monica there, he looked surprised. He probably hadn't expected her to wait in the hallway like this.

"Accountant Norton?"

"H-hello!"

After her short talk with Ryn, she'd completely forgotten the phrase she'd just been practicing. She held out the paper-wrapped object she'd been clutching to her chest and mumbled, "Um, Lord Cyril, er... I... Thank you for, er, your jacket *yephterday!*"

All her practice had been for naught—she'd fumbled the whole thing. Flushing up to her ears, she began to tremble.

“Oh, right,” said Cyril, as though he was only now recalling giving her the jacket. He took it from her.

Thank goodness. I managed to thank him and return it... Even though I choked. Monica privately sighed in relief, then shyly muttered, “It, um, seems like I’m always borrowing your jacket, Lord Cyril.”

“...? Are you?”

“Um, like the day we were overseeing the supplies...”

After Casey’s assassination attempt, Monica had cried a lot, then fallen asleep. When she’d woken up, she’d found Cyril’s jacket lying on top of her. Thinking about it made her feel pangs of guilt in the pit of her stomach.

“Accountant Norton?”

He’s being so considerate to me because he doesn’t know the truth...

Cyril must have thought of her as a victim simply caught up in the previous day’s incident, just as he had that day with the lumber. That was why he was worried about her. He always said stern things, but he was a kind person who looked out for others, even if he didn’t show it. And every time he was kind to her, a little more guilt welled up in her heart for lying about her true identity.

Is there anything I can do to repay him?

She couldn’t tell him who she was. The moment she did, the curtains would close on her pretend school life. Instead of doing something for him as the Silent Witch, she wanted to do something for him as Accountant Norton of the student council.

What can I do for him as a council member...? she wondered. Then she straightened up and met his gaze.

“Um, Lord C-Cyril!” she stammered. “I’ll, um, do my very best, so...”

She’d do her very best—how vague and unreliable those words must have sounded. But it didn’t matter. She wanted desperately to convey her intentions to him—to tell him what she could do as Accountant Norton.

“Let’s do everything we can to, um, make the school festival a success. Okay?”

Somehow, she managed to get the whole thing out. But right after she finished, embarrassment overcame her, and she hunched back over and began to play with her fingers.

She heard a short exhalation from above—a laugh, perhaps. Hunched over now, she glanced up through her bangs and saw Cyril grinning slightly.

“Naturally,” he responded in a very haughty, Cyril-like way. It made her strangely happy.

Same old Cyril..., she thought, an awkward smile appearing on her face.

Then Cyril glanced back at the student council room, and his arrogant demeanor quickly disappeared, replaced by a look of anguish.

“And this is *exactly* when we should be putting forth every effort,” he continued. “So why am I not at his side right now? ...Ugh. He’s working, and yet I must rest...?”

“Lord Cyril, tomorrow! We’ll help him tomorrow!”

This was the same old Cyril Monica knew—bold and strong-willed, and prone to going a little overboard when it came to Felix.

Hearing Cyril’s voice from the hallway, Felix chuckled and wet his pen in his inkwell.

“He doesn’t need to worry so much. This is practically a break compared to my other work.”

As if to answer him, his water spirit, Wildianu, in the form of a white lizard, crawled out from his uniform pocket.

When Wildianu attempted to use his tiny limbs to clamber over to the desk, the prince stopped writing and lifted the lizard up on his finger, depositing him at his destination.

“And once I finish this work, I’ll take a little break myself.”

Wildianu looked up at him with his small light-blue eyes. Lizards’ faces couldn’t express emotion the way human faces could, but somehow Felix got the sense the spirit was troubled.

“Master,” said Wildianu, “are you truly going?”

“This day only comes once a year,” replied Felix. “Mind the place while I’m gone, will you?”

“If you go out at night too often, it’s bound to draw the attention of Duke Clockford...”

“And that’s why I have you.”

Wildianu was a high water spirit. He wasn’t skilled at combat or detection, but he was very adept when it came to illusion magic. Whenever Felix snuck out, Wildianu would stay behind and use magic to fool everyone else into thinking the prince was still there.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate having a talented ally like you,” said Felix.

Wildianu looked up at him like he wanted to say something.

“There’s no need for concern,” said Felix serenely to his worrywart spirit. “I won’t forsake my most important objective.” He closed his pale eyelids, before slowly opening them again. A dark light of determination sparkled in his beautiful eyes, sky blue with just a hint of green in them. “Ten years ago, I swore to engrave the name Felix Arc Ridill in history. And I have never wavered in that oath, as I’m sure you know.” He smiled darkly.

Wildianu bowed his head. “It will be done, Master,” he replied.

* * *

“Monica! Oh, my sister! We simply must go to the festival in Corlapton!”

Intending to report on the events of the last several days, Monica had gone to visit Isabelle—her collaborator in her mission to guard the second prince. When she arrived, the younger girl had rung a little bell, a big smile on her face, and suggested they head out.

As she jingled the bell, Monica noticed she was wearing a hood with wildcat ears over one of her dresses.

Monica tilted her head in confusion at the odd outfit.

“Ummm, Corlapton...?” she ventured.

“A town to the east of the academy. Tonight, they are holding the Bell-Ringing Festival!”

With autumn’s arrival, harvest and fertility festivals were held all across the Kingdom to give thanks to the King of the Earth Spirits, Archraedo.

Every region had their own unique take on these festivals. Monica had heard once that in the eastern region, since it was believed that the creatures of the land were Archraedo’s servants, people would wear costumes or headdresses in their likeness. That must be why Isabelle was wearing the wildcat hood.

But this business about ringing bells was new to Monica. “What does ringing the bells represent?” she asked.

“The bells are meant to guide the souls of the dead.”

“The souls of the dead?” Monica looked dubious. That didn’t have anything to do with harvests or bumper crops.

Isabelle’s maid, Agatha, explained as she prepared their tea. “In the eastern lands, there is a legend that on festival nights, the watchman of the underworld gets so jealous of the humans’ fun, he leaves his post and sneaks into the festivities. As a result, the souls of the dead are able to cross through the gates of the underworld and wander back into this one.”

The underworld watchman was the King of the Earth Spirits’s underling. He was an eerie creature who possessed black claws and wings and wore a white mask over his face. He was depicted in quite terrifying ways in books for children, and adults would use him to warn their sons and daughters against bad behavior—if they didn’t behave, the underworld watchman would chase them down for all eternity.

But if he was willing to leave his post to secretly enjoy a festival, perhaps he wasn’t as inhuman as people believed.

“When the festival ends, the watchman and the souls of the dead return to the underworld. The bells are used to show them the way back to where they belong.”

Isabelle nodded firmly at Agatha’s explanation and held up the bell in her hand. “That is why animal costumes and bells are essential for autumn festivals

in the east!”

She went on to tell Monica that while she was the daughter of a count, every year on this day she would dress up and sneak into the festival with Agatha.



Monica listened to Isabelle's and Agatha's cheerful explanations, her eyes downcast. She felt awful about it, since Isabelle seemed so excited, but she had other plans she couldn't get out of.

"Um, Lady Isabelle, I—"

"You know, I wanted so badly to go to the chess competition and cheer you on from the very front row! As the villainess in your story, however, it was simply not possible. But if we're at an event outside the academy, there will be no problems! In fact, since everyone dresses up for the Bell-Ringing Festival, it's perfect for having some fun in secret!"

Oh no, thought Monica, feeling even worse. Her voice was quiet as she spoke. "I'm really sorry, Lady Isabelle. I have something, um, to do after this..."

Isabelle stopped moving entirely. She remained frozen for a few seconds, then quietly removed her wildcat hood. Her face flushed, as though she was embarrassed over having been so excited, and she murmured, "No, I apologize for getting ahead of myself. You have such an important mission, and yet I'm acting like this..."

Tiny tears began to form in Isabelle's big eyes.

She's helped me out more times than I can count, and I can't even do this for her! thought Monica. Feeling pangs of guilt in her heart, she squeezed out a few more words. "Um, if I ever, well, end up going to Kerbeck...I want to go to a festival with you. You've helped me so much, so, um, I want to do everything I can to repay you!"

Once she was finished speaking, she paled. Was she bothering Isabelle with her suggestion? Was she being rude somehow?

But her fears were unfounded.

"Repayment? Oh, I could never! We owe you so much, my sister. I wouldn't dream of asking anything of you in return! Still..." Isabelle's head came back up. Her eyes were glittering. "When festival season comes again, please, by all means, visit Kerbeck! I will do everything in my power, absolutely *everything*, to make sure you have a good time! Oh, and we should wear matching costumes! We can make you a cute staff with a bell... Oh! And there's this traditional

baked sweet, and it's said that if you split it with a friend and eat it, you'll be friends forever!"

As Isabelle excitedly listed off the possibilities, Agatha watched her with the face of a kind older sister. "That sounds delightful, my lady."

* * *

Monica returned to her room and took off her uniform, then changed into the navy dress Louis had given her. Considering who she was about to see, her Sage attire might have been more fitting. But she hadn't needed her robes or staff for her mission, so she'd left them back in her mountain cabin.

The dress Louis had sent wasn't meant for balls, only minor outings, but it was the most respectable thing she had in terms of personal clothing. To finish the outfit, Monica put on her white coat, also from Louis, then twirled around in place.

"Does it look good on me, Nero?"

"Yeah, you bet it does. Anyway, where are you going?"

"Well—"

Just then, they heard a knocking at the window. Monica went over and opened it, letting in a little golden bird.

The bird landed on the ground and took the form of a beautiful blond-haired maid.

Rynzbelfeid, contracted spirit of the Barrier Mage Louis Miller, picked up the hem of her skirt and curtsied.

"I've come to fetch you," she said. "I shall now guide you to the estate of the Starseer Witch."

Monica had been invited to visit another of the Seven Sages—the Starseer Witch Mary Harvey, the most talented prophet in the Kingdom of Ridill.



CHAPTER 7

The Starseer Witch Mary Harvey's Heart-Pounding Reading☆

The Starseer Witch's estate was about two hours by carriage from Serendia Academy, but with Ryn's flight magecraft, it didn't take much time at all. Monica arrived at the Harvey residence in the evening, just as the sun was setting; she'd asked Nero to stay behind in the attic room.

"Welcome to my estate, Monica dear."

The voice welcoming her belonged to a silver-haired beauty reclining lazily on a long, cushioned bench. She had an odd aura about her and seemed to possess both the quiet calm of a mature lady and the girlish innocence of a dreamer.

This was Mary Harvey, one of the Seven Sages and the greatest prophet in the land—and the very person who had invited Monica here.

Wearing her Sage robes over a thin, revealing silk dress, she took a wineglass from a young servant standing beside her and downed its contents in one gulp. She had a number of servants bustling back and forth waiting on her—all young men in dress shirts and short pants cut off above the knees. It seemed that was the uniform here.

Seated across from Mary was a man with long chestnut-colored hair tied up in a braid—the Barrier Mage Louis Miller. He was downing his wine like it was water. He, too, wore his Sage robe and had his staff leaning against the long bench. That meant Monica had been called here on Seven Sages business.

Louis placed his empty glass on the table, then turned to look at Monica and smiled. "Well, if it isn't my esteemed colleague. Good evening. That dress suits you very well."

"It's good to see you again, Mr. Louis. Ummm, ummm..."

Monica looked back and forth between Mary and Louis as she stammered. She didn't know why she'd been called here. *But if Louis came, too, does that mean we're facing a major problem that requires multiple Sages?* ...Then again, both of them were elegantly drinking wine poured by good-looking young men.

But then, why did they call me here? she thought, confused.

Mary, smiling, gestured for Monica to sit. “Now, now, have a seat, Monica, my dear. Do you like wine? I have an excellent one from Farfolia. This has been a fruitful year for wine, so I simply had to buy a few bottles.”

In the Kingdom of Ridill, you were provisionally considered an adult at sixteen and allowed to drink alcohol like beer and wine. But Monica never had a good time with alcohol. In fact, she always had a *terrible* time.

“I, um, don’t really...”

“Oh? Well, let’s get you some fruit juice, then. Come! We have rare fruits as well. It’s still a tad early for dinner, but here, eat up!”

“Th-thank you very much.”

One of the young servants poured a glass for her, and she sipped at it, looking around the room.

The Starseer Witch was originally from a viscount’s family, and she’d served the kingdom for many years as one of the Sages. As one might expect, her estate was gorgeous.

Particularly splendid were the windows. They had beautiful decorative frames and were fitted with large panes of glass, allowing for an excellent view of the outside scenery. The glass was probably necessary for her to see out and read the stars, but even so, it was quite extravagant.

“Um, what did you need from me today, ma’am...?” Monica hesitantly asked.

Mary licked her wine-wet lips and smiled mischievously. “Come, now. You mustn’t be so formal. I simply thought, since Louie was already here, we could all have a meal together and deepen our relationships as fellow Sages. You know, I’ve been wanting to get to know you better, dear. We’re the only two girls in the group, after all.”

“Oh,” responded Monica noncommittally.

Next to her, Louis opened his mouth, then closed it again. He was probably about to say something along the lines of, *I’m not sure you can call yourself a girl at your age*, but he seemed to have enough respect for Mary that he

swallowed his words. After all, Mary Harvey *was* estimated to be the oldest of the Sages, not to mention the foremost prophet in the kingdom.

The Seven Sages were the highest-ranked mages in Ridill, and each specialized in a different field of magic. While Monica could use unchanted magecraft and Louis was a genius at creating barriers, the Starseer Witch Mary Harvey was a master at reading the stars. Astrology was by no means a rare field of study, but Mary's incredible precision put her leaps and bounds ahead of the rest, and her skills had gained her immense trust from the king. She always took the lead at meetings of the Sages.

That gave Monica a thought. Was Mary criticizing her in a roundabout way for never attending those meetings? It had been about two years since Monica's appointment, after all. The meetings were held once every few months, but she'd only attended two or three.

"Um, I'm really sorry for not being at many of the meetings...", apologized Monica, trying to take the initiative.

Mary burst into laughter. "Oh, don't you worry about that! You don't need to force yourself to attend. Not much happens at them anyway. Usually you'll have Louie and Emanuel exchanging nasty remarks while Raul casually eats vegetables and Bradford just snores through the whole thing. And then there's Ray...who attends even less frequently than you do."

This description was more than enough to shatter any illusions one might hold of the Seven Sages being an elite group of serious academics. Mary had called everyone by their first name, but if Monica recalled correctly, Emanuel was the Gem Mage, Raul the Witch of Thorns, Bradford the Artillery Mage, and Ray the Abyss Shaman.

As Monica peeled the skin from one of the grapes she'd been offered, she shot a sidelong glance at Louis. Both he and Mary were sociable—relative to the other Sages anyway—but she'd never heard of the pair having any sort of personal relationship.

"Mr. Louis, do you come to Lady Harvey's mansion often?" she asked.

Louis languidly shook his head. "No. She actually had something of a favor to ask me regarding a certain sealing barrier."

“Ah, yes,” said Mary. “In thanks, I prepared food and wine, but then we started thinking, why not invite dear Monica as well? That’s why I had his spirit bring you here.”

As his title implied, Louis was a master of barrier spells. He maintained defensive barriers around many major facilities in the kingdom. Mary had probably asked him for help with something similar.

Monica hesitated. She wasn’t sure whether to ask any more questions about it.

“Oh, yes!” said Mary, as if suddenly remembering something. “There’s a little festival happening in a nearby town. I’ll be doing a magical dedication, releasing magicules. Monica, dear, you should come and watch!”

Magical dedications were sometimes performed at festivals and ceremonial events. These were rituals wherein a mage would present some kind of magecraft, then dedicate it to a god or Spirit King. The sort Mary had referred to involved the mage absorbing mana from the surrounding environment before releasing it.

When too much mana pooled in an area, it tended to lure in certain creatures, such as spirits or dragons. What’s more, people living in areas with excessive mana density were at higher risk of mana poisoning.

Monica knew of these types of rituals, but she’d never actually seen one. She’d been worming her way out of any ritual-related jobs ever since joining the Seven Sages.

As she struggled to respond, Louis grinned in amusement and narrowed his eyes at her. “Magical dedications are part of our duty as Sages, my esteemed colleague. I think you would benefit from seeing one in person.”

“Oof...” Monica’s face clouded over. *I don’t want to do any magical dedications if I can help it*, she thought sincerely. After all, such rituals were usually the centerpiece of a festival and drew a lot of attention. It was too much for someone like Monica, who hated standing out.

Mary put a hand to her cheek and smiled. “Well, you don’t need to think that hard about it. Just go and enjoy the festival. Magicule releases are really pretty,

you know!”

“Oh. And where is this festival...?”

“In a town called Corlapton.”

Why, that was the same town Isabelle had spoken about just a few hours ago. It was only a coincidence, but Monica couldn't help feeling destiny at work. She thought back on the origin of the festival Agatha had explained.

“That's, um, the Bell-Ringing Festival from the eastern lands, right? Errr, where the souls of the dead return to this world...”

“That's the one. Every year, they dedicate crops, songs, and dances to thank the King of the Earth Spirits Archraedo and mourn the dead. But this year, the stars are so favorable that they're holding a special magical dedication.”

Monica wasn't familiar with how the circulation of the stars related to magecraft. But for Mary, the kingdom's greatest astrologian, it played a big role in the power and precision of spells.

Monica had to admit she *was* a little curious about Mary's magical dedication. She glanced at Louis and asked, “Um, Mr. Louis, are you, uh, going, too?”

“No, I'm afraid not, but I *will* lend you Ryn. She'll get you to the festival in no time.”

Flight magecraft generally allowed only the caster to fly, and only for relatively short distances. But Ryn, as a high wind spirit, could enclose several people in a veil of wind and travel far and fast, thanks to the incredible mana reserves and manipulation skills only spirits possessed. With Ryn's power, Monica would be able to participate in the festival and sneak back into Serendia Academy in plenty of time. That must be what Louis had in mind as well.

“You're lending us a high spirit?” exclaimed Mary. “Oh, you sure know how to make a lady happy! If you were fifteen years younger, I might have even given you a little smooch on the cheek.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.” Louis feigned a laugh in response to Mary's bold remark—it seemed she had no intention of being discreet about her fondness for younger men.

Casting a glance at Monica, he continued. “In any case, my fellow Sage, it’s time for you to resign yourself and learn how to perform your more public duties.”

“Oh, come now. You needn’t be so harsh. Why, Monica is one of the few Sages who takes her work seriously!” Mary leaned forward and hugged Monica. The soft sensation and the smell of her perfume made Monica’s head swim. Rubbing her cheek against Monica’s, she exclaimed, “Thank you so much for your help recently calculating my students’ observation records! You’re a lifesaver!”

Back when Monica was holed up in her cabin, one of the tasks she’d accepted had been calculating the orbits of stars observed by the astronomers studying under Mary. It had been one of the most difficult jobs she’d taken on, but that only made it all the more worthwhile, and Monica remembered it well.

“I think, um...one of the star’s records went back ten years,” she remarked, bringing up something she’d been privately curious about. “The same one, calculated over and over. Did anything happen with it?”

Mary leisurely shook her head. “Nothing, unfortunately. The observational results and astrological readings just won’t stay consistent.”

The Starseer Witch could use a star’s color, the rate at which it twinkled, its orbit, and its distance from other stars to predict the futures of individuals and nations alike. Monica could perform calculations based only on the observational results—she had no idea how the numbers related to people’s fates. All she’d done was use those results to calculate orbits, then provided that information to Mary. But she knew the witch had been curious about one star in particular for quite some time.

“Um, so that star you’re so interested in... Whose fate does it represent?”

The hand carrying Mary’s wineglass to her lips stopped, and she sighed. The name she said next came as something of a surprise.

“The second prince, Felix Arc Ridill.”

Monica couldn’t help but gasp. Louis’s expression didn’t change, but his brows knit ever so slightly. Whether or not Mary noticed their reactions, she

put a hand to her cheek and sighed sorrowfully.

“I pay particular attention to what the stars say about the future of the kingdom and the royal family... But for around ten years now, I have found Prince Felix’s fate alone unreadable.”

Mary’s readings of the stars weren’t all-powerful, nor were they all-seeing. But hearing Felix’s name come up now, specifically, caused a stir in Monica’s heart.

Casey’s assassination attempt. The intruder at the chess competition. After a string of unsettling events, the school festival still awaited them.

There’s that bad feeling again... Monica hung her head and clutched the fabric at her chest.

Mary peered into Monica’s face, still holding her in her arms. Mary’s pale blue eyes, faintly unfocused, reflected Monica like the surface of a serene lake.

“Um, Lady Harvey?”

“Oh, what a gloomy face you’re making! Hee-hee, I know! As thanks for helping me, how about I give you a reading?”

She slowly rose, then moved to the window, her thin silk dress trailing behind her. The sun had set during their conversation, and stars now twinkled faintly in the sky. Gazing at them, the foremost prophet of the kingdom read Monica’s fortune.

“You’re very lucky in love right now! You might even spend a *passionate* night with a wonderful gentleman!”

Monica hung her head, looking like she was about to throw up. She covered her face with her hands. “I don’t need any of that!” she wailed. After all, just the day before, someone had asked her to marry him for chess.

“That sounded more like a reading from a cheap psychic than a Sage’s prophecy,” murmured Louis, looking quite fed up.

* * *

After a short but pleasant chat, it was time to head out, and Mary got up from her seat, saying she was going to fix her makeup. Louis, seeing her exit the

room, dismissed the servants and went to the window, opening it without asking anyone's permission.

When he did, a small golden bird fluttered into the room, despite the late hour—it was Ryn. The bird flew around in a circle, then changed into a beautiful woman in a maid's outfit. Now in human form, Ryn asked, "Have you enjoyed your debauchery, sir?" Neither her face nor her voice held a hint of emotion.

Louis frowned, his face twitching. "Please be sure you never say such a thing in front of my wife." Leaving his pregnant wife at home to go out for "debauchery," as she had phrased it, sounded terrible.

Ryn nodded earnestly at his sour look. "Yes, sir. Then I shall report to Lady Rosalie that you drank wine surrounded by attractive young men."

"Clearly, I need to retrain you from scratch, you idiotic maid—starting with the way you talk. But first, to the task at hand. Bring the Starseer Witch and the Silent Witch to Corlapton. After that, stay with the Silent Witch. And when the festival is over, be sure to bring her back to Serendia Academy."

"Of course, sir."

As a shut-in, Monica had never felt much need for flight magecraft. Times like these, however, made her seriously reflect on how convenient it could be. She might not ever be able to flit around freely like Glenn could, but even a short flight here or there would be perfect for sneaking out of the dorm.

Maybe I should practice, she thought. She'd tried it out once at Minerva's. The spell depended heavily on the caster's physical abilities—mainly their sense of balance—but she'd wanted to experiment to see if she could supplement her shortcomings with a wind spell cast simultaneously.

To make a long story short, she'd failed. After floating up a little ways, she'd spun around one and a half times, then face-planted into the ground. In that moment, her hopeless motor skills had outstripped her perfect calculations. She didn't really want to try it again, if she could help it.

As her face soured at the memory, Louis shut the window. "My fellow Sage," he called out to her. The dark of night permeated the glass pane, reflecting Louis's image like a mirror. His eyes were narrowed sharply. "I am somewhat

troubled that the Starseer Witch can't read the second prince's fate."

"...I agree."

"The intruder from the chess competition is scheduled to be transferred to the capital soon. Once that happens, I'll have free rein to investigate. I'll make sure he gives me the name of the one pulling the strings, no matter what I have to do. There's something about this intruder that's got me rather curious," he said, snapping his fingers through his glove.

Louis had delicate, handsome hands like most nobles, but Monica knew he had a callus at the base of his middle finger from punching. She privately pitied the criminal who would soon be in his charge.

"For now," he continued, "I will be lending you this useless maid, so feel free to put her through the wringer."

"Understood," said Ryn. "I, Rynzbelfeid, a maid of utmost talent, will provide my assistance to the Silent Witch."

Louis shot a glare at the insolent spirit, then lightly cleared his throat. "Also, I'll be making an appearance on the day of the school festival. Partly for security, but... Let's just say I have other things to do as well."

Monica couldn't imagine a more reliable helper, with Ryn able to cover a large area and Louis being so talented with barriers. She bowed her head in thanks.

"Well, just think of today as a little break before the big job," said Louis, speaking gently for once. "Go enjoy yourself at the festival. Slacking—taking breaks is important. And anyway, today's magical dedication will feature an ancient magic item. You like that stuff, right?"

"Wait! She's using an ancient magic item?!" cried Monica despite herself. She leaned forward, her eyes sparkling.

By engraving a magic formula into some ore or metal, one could create a magic item that would allow even those without knowledge of magecraft to activate the formula. They were luxury items, produced by only a handful of artisans. Any such item created by one of the Seven Sages would be worth enough to build a house from scratch.

However, modern magic items could be imbued with only a limited amount of mana, as evinced by the Spiralflame, which Casey had used to try and assassinate Felix. It boasted immense power for a modern magic item but had a very small area of effect to compensate. You almost never saw a magic item created in this day and age that was more powerful than a mage in the flesh.

But ancient ones were different. They were created by mages of bygone eras, when magecraft was considered mystical and secretive—and they contained far, *far* more power than their modern counterparts. What's more, they'd been created using ancient magical techniques, which were different from those in current use. It was said that even deciphering them was impossible, to say nothing of replicating one. Every mage wanted to see a powerful magic item with historic value at least once in their life, and Monica was no exception.

I've heard almost every ancient magic item still in existence is either regarded as a national treasure or under the management of high-ranking nobles... I can't believe I might get to see one in use! Her heart leaped with excitement.

"Um, what sort of ancient magic item will be used tonight?"

"It's an accessory called Starweaving Mira. It absorbs mana from the land, then releases it. In fact, the very reason I was called here was to undo its seal."

Certain ancient magic items, especially very powerful ones, were placed under a seal that required state permission to open. Apparently, the Starseer Witch had called Louis here to release it.

"The seals on ancient magic items are first-rate barriers, right? I heard they're really hard to undo..."

"That they are. Lest you forget, however, I am the Barrier Mage. Undoing the seal didn't give me too much trouble in and of itself, but..." Louis trailed off, his gaze dropping to his feet. He looked a little weary. "You know how it's said ancient magic items have minds of their own?"

"Y-yes. They have, um, personalities within, right?"

That was the single greatest difference between modern and ancient magic items. Ancient ones had a consciousness, and apparently, they would sometimes test their wielders. Monica was endlessly curious about how one

might go about bestowing an item with a mind of its own.

As her eyes continued to sparkle, Louis's gaze grew distant, and he murmured, "Starweaving Mira is one of those items with an interesting story—if its owner is male, it kills him."

That sounded like a rather frightening tale.

"While I was doing adjustments on the seal, it tried to speak to me. Its personality makes a strong impression, that's for sure. And let me tell you, it was grating on my nerves something awful..."

Monica was perplexed; Louis seemed far more exhausted than usual.

At this, Ryn chimed in flatly, "An ancient magic item that can wear down the famously shameless Lord Louis? That sounds interesting indeed."

"You give me a headache, too, but Starweaving Mira did so in a rather different way. I'm going straight home to rest my mind." Louis rose from the bench, picked up his staff, then sighed. "I need some Rosalie time..." he muttered.

An indescribable pathos emanated from his retreating form.

* * *

Corlapton was a town located to the east of the royal capital and intended mainly for providing room and board to travelers. Due to its position along a major river, it saw high traffic on a regular basis, and on the night of the autumn festival, it was even livelier than usual. The people on the streets wore all manner of costumes, sporting furs and masks, and walked around the open-air stalls with bell-adorned staffs in their hands.

Amid the hustle and bustle was a man selling straw-work dolls from a blanket laid on the ground. He was probably in his mid-twenties, with pronounced features and a beard. He wore a bandanna around his short black hair, and his work clothes were covered with pockets. More pouches for tools hung from his belt.

"Argh." He sighed. "Why isn't anything sellin'? Guess I shoulda went with masks or staffs. Shoulda stuck with the basics. Too bad this was the only stuff I could get materials for on the cheap..."

The man sat cross-legged on the blanket as he muttered, one of the chronically underselling dolls in his hand. Just then, a little boy singing some song about counting pigs stopped at his blanket. The boy's eyes were drawn to the straw rooster.

The seller put on a friendly smile and used an ingratiating voice. "Oh! You sure have an eye for quality, young man. This rooster was made by the great craftsman Bartholomeus himself. The gallant cockscomb is a thing of pure art, eh?"

"It's so weird-looking!"

"What was that, you little brat?!" yelled the man, who was named Bartholomeus. The boy cackled, then fled into the crowds and disappeared.

"Damn stupid brat...," the man swore to himself, lighting a cigar. The rooster he'd made was the best of the best, with a uniquely large cockscomb. A grand comb was the very symbol of a rooster. "Bigger is better," he'd declared, ultimately making the comb so big it was a miracle the thing didn't immediately topple over.

His other straw dolls were similar. One was a pig walking on two legs in a very strange pose. Another was a horse with which he'd tried so hard to convey the motion of jumping, it had ceased to be recognizable. He'd added so much stylistic embellishment, you couldn't even tell they were pigs or horses.

The straw stitching was extremely elaborate—a display of technical skill. Unfortunately, the finished product was incomprehensible, and he couldn't get anyone to buy them.

Bartholomeus exhaled smoke from his nose, thinking bitterly to himself, *Damn it all. If only that idiot Moses hadn't gotten himself arrested! I wouldn't have needed to go on the lam like this!*

Bartholomeus was what was called a jack-of-all-trades. But even jacks-of-all-trades couldn't be good at *everything*—some were most comfortable swinging a sword around, while others specialized in drama and theater. As a has-been craftsman, Bartholomeus mainly took on jobs creating tools and fixing houses, which earned him a meager living. If it paid, he'd do anything from tuning musical instruments to repairing stables or even darning socks and polishing

shoes. That was how he lived his life—from one trip to the next.

One of his recent jobs had been to replicate a company's seal. His client had been a small-time villain named Moses well-known in these parts, and it was clear he wouldn't be using the seal for anything legitimate.

Of course, Bartholomeus didn't care what the stuff he made was used for. As long as it put money in his pocket, he'd make anything. That was his motto.

Apparently, Moses had used the company seal he'd made to try and sneak into Serendia Academy, of all things. He couldn't think of many ideas more reckless than that. The second prince attended that school. Security was naturally strict, and if he got caught, he might be charged with treason against the crown on top of illegal entry. Not a very nice bonus, as far as Bartholomeus was concerned.

Come to think of it, he was really tryin' to hurry me along on that one. Took it before I even put the tail on the bull. Really hope that's not why he got arrested...

He didn't know how much Moses had told the authorities after his capture, but Bartholomeus could see himself being considered a party to the crime. So he'd left his old base of operations in a hurry and fled to Corlaption.

With all the people coming in and out for the festival, this was the perfect place to hide, and a great place to do business. That was why he was trying to make it big with these straw dolls he'd worked so hard on. Unfortunately, sales were...lacking. At this rate, his traveling expenses would run dry.

"Guess that means it's time for a big gamble."

The cigar in his mouth bobbing up and down, Bartholomeus glared in the direction of the ceremony venue. The main event that night would be a magical dedication. He'd heard one of the Seven Sages would be there—and carrying an ancient magic item called Starweaving Mira to boot.

I'll steal the item—no, I'll just look at it! And then I'll make replicas that'll sell like hotcakes!

Ancient magic items were historical works of art, and common people almost never got a chance to see them. Creating souvenirs based on one's appearance

and selling them as good-luck charms or blessings of the Starseer Witch was sure to make him a fortune. Counterfeiting was a serious crime, but he figured he'd be fine selling cheap knockoffs as souvenirs.

It's close—but not a crime. Damn, I'm a genius!

Ancient magic items were kept under strict lock and key, and even setting foot on the site where one was held was a crime. But Bartholomeus, who had an awfully unscrupulous attitude for a craftsman, was optimistic. He wasn't going to steal it, so who cared?

"Ha-ha! Time to get on down there!"

He wasn't sneaking in anywhere. He was just lost and happened to wander in. It wasn't a crime. *Definitely not a crime*, Bartholomeus said to himself again, though it was, of course, a crime.

But Bartholomeus was the sort who always believed things would turn out all right for him in the end. So he packed up his straw dolls and started toward the ceremony venue in high spirits, his thoughts consumed by the ancient magic item he still hadn't seen.



CHAPTER 8

Monica Becomes a Delinquent

In order to transport several people quickly, Ryn would enclose them in a wind barrier, then move the barrier and everything inside it at once. A human's limited mana capacity would make maintaining such a barrier for a long period of time—not to mention moving it with any speed—nigh impossible.

Monica could make things float using wind magecraft, but she certainly couldn't send anything over a great distance at this speed. And if she tried to put *herself* in the air, the difficulty would positively skyrocket. Slowly lowering more than twenty pterodragons to the ground was considerably easier than lifting her own body off it. Glenn, who could easily flit around in the sky despite being an apprentice, was a very unique case.

"This is incredible!" exclaimed Mary. "High spirits never fail to impress, do they?"

She smiled, stroking the box she held to her chest. The container was gorgeous, with lots of gold decorations, and just big enough to lay across both her hands. Apparently, contained within it was the ancient magic item—Starweaving Mira.

It would take a little while longer to arrive, so Monica decided to ask something that had been on her mind. "Um, so Starweaving Mira. It draws in mana from the surrounding land, right? How much can it absorb?"

"The movement of the stars greatly affects its power. If used during the day, it can only absorb less than a tenth of the mana it can at night. But when the stars are out and in a good position...I suppose it could absorb two or three Corlaptons' worth of mana. And that's what we're going to see tonight!"

Monica remembered the witch saying the revolutions of the stars were good this year. Apparently, the decision to hold a magical dedication this autumn had been made with the ancient magic item's properties in mind. That made a lot of sense to her.

Mary quietly slid over to Monica, then whispered in her ear, “I can’t say this out loud, but the mana Starweaving Mira absorbs can also be converted into an attack spell. Depending on how you use it, it could function as a weapon of war... That’s why it’s sealed away most of the time.”

If an attack spell used the mana absorbed from such a vast area—when Monica did a rough calculation of its power, she grimaced. It would probably be dozens of times stronger than her own spirit-king summoning—easily enough to blow away an entire town. Mary was right. Under the proper conditions, it could easily be used as a weapon of war.

“U-um, if that’s true, isn’t it a really important secret...? Is it okay for you to, well, tell me about it?”

“Tee-hee. I don’t see a problem with a Sage knowing, do you? We’re top-ranked mages, after all. And one day, *you* may end up using Starweaving Mira yourself.”

I really hope that day doesn’t come, thought Monica privately.

Ahead of them, Ryn piped up. “The town is in sight. Where would you like to land?”

“Well, now. If I came down from the sky right onto the altar, wouldn’t that be something?”

Monica’s eyebrows shot up at the suggestion, and she shook her head fiercely. “U-ummm, I would, errr, r-rather you set us down somewhere that w-won’t stand owph!”

Two of the Seven Sages falling out of the sky like that would certainly make for a brilliant festival display, but Monica didn’t intend to be up on that altar to begin with. If she could, she’d be watching the magical dedication from a quiet spot without many people around.

“Oh, are you sure? In that case, let’s land behind the church where the ceremony’s being held. Could you bring us as close to the church’s wall as you can, Ryn, dear? I’ll create an illusion so that we’re not conspicuous.”

Mary then began to quickly chant a spell. When she was done, she waved a slender finger, and faint silvery particles of light surrounded all of them.

Monica couldn't see what they looked like from the outside, but she assumed they were wrapped in the same pattern as the church wall. *If only there were a way to completely avoid notice*, she thought... *Like an illusion to make you see-through.*

Illusion magecraft was an incredibly advanced skill. Monica could use a little, but it took so much mana and involved so many restrictions that she barely ever chose to.

Even Mary's lips pursed somewhat as she maintained the illusion, as though she wasn't quite satisfied with her work.

"Illusions are so difficult, aren't they?" she said. "I'm confident I could replicate the night sky to perfection, since I've spent so much of my life staring at it, but this..."

She may not have been proud of it, but with the sun down, you'd have to get pretty close to notice anything strange. Plenty of people were on the other side of the metal fence surrounding the church, but none of them was even looking in their direction.

Ryn set them down lightly, without a sound. The spirit was always suggesting new and "fun" ways of landing, but she must have picked up on how little Monica wanted to stand out that day.

"Let's stick to the wall and go around," urged Mary.

As Monica started walking, her gaze casually strayed to the other side of the fence. And then she froze.

Huh? Wait. Is that...?

Someone walking through the crowd had caught her eye. They wore a white mask on the upper half of their face and a cloak with black wings around their shoulders. They must have been dressed as the underworld watchman.

But what had caught her eye were the long legs she could see stretching out from the hem of the cloak. Monica would never mistake their length, nor that perfect golden ratio.

"P-Pri...", she said suddenly.

“Oh? What’s the matter, Monica dear?” Mary asked. She and Ryn looked at Monica, confused.

If it were only Ryn here, Monica could have told her the prince was at the festival and asked her to tail him. But Mary didn’t know about her secret mission.

“Um, well, I just saw someone I know over there...,” she said. “I’m, um, going to go say hello!”

Since they were right near the church’s back gate, Monica flew through it and began searching for that golden ratio—also known as Felix. But she had trouble finding him; had he moved too deep into the crowd? She saw people here and there dressed as the underworld watchman, but none with blond hair and a body that obeyed the golden ratio.

Why would he even be here? He didn’t have anyone like a guard with him. Did he sneak out like Lady Isabelle?

At any other time, Monica wouldn’t have been this panicked, but they’d just had a big incident with an intruder at the chess competition the day before. She couldn’t help feeling anxious.

She was supposed to be his bodyguard—she couldn’t overlook him walking around alone like this. *I have to find him*, she thought.

Raising her head, she glanced around again but was quickly mobbed by people. It was after sunset, but the town was lit up with lanterns, and the streets were packed from end to end with people. Apparently, everyone was here to see the Starseer Witch’s magical dedication.

Each time Monica, who was quite petite, thought she had made it a step forward, she found herself carried off to the side by the crowd. And when she tried to get back, she ended up going backward for some reason, ultimately falling to the side of the street.

“Oof. Owwww...”

Her social anxiety had gotten a lot better recently, but only to the extent that she was able to walk around town when Nero or Lana was with her. Getting jostled by throngs of people at a festival on her own was not conducive to

staying calm.

Now on the side of the street, she suddenly remembered to breathe. She gasped for air, tears forming in her eyes. She looked up and saw people, people, and more people... It was too overwhelming. She felt dizzy.

Crowds like this brought back her very worst memory.

But these were festive streets, not at all like the place from her past. She knew that, but the commotion of people going every which way forced her mind to draw the connection anyway.

She heard the voices of the mob, calling out to burn the sinner.

The sounds in her ears grew ever louder, and her vision blurred.

“Fath...er...”

The memory she’d been keeping locked away slowly became more vivid.

As she stood there, no idea what to do, her face white, someone’s arm bumped into her shoulder. Monica fell onto the road rear first. She immediately covered her head with her hands and whimpered.

“Eeeek, u-ugh...”

Then the person who had hit her arm addressed her.

“Whoops, sorry ’bout that. You okay, runt?”

But right now, even a voice from right above her couldn’t reach her ears.

The man who had bumped her scratched his cheek, looking troubled. He had black hair and a beard and wore a bandanna. He had small irises, full lips, and the kind of prominent features you didn’t generally see in this area.

He squatted down in front of the trembling Monica, then fished something from his sack and stuck it out in front of her. It was a doll made from woven straw. It sort of looked like a chicken, but its comb was awfully big for a chicken. Too big.

“Come on! It’s me, a chicken! Bok-bok-bok! Squaaawk!” he said as he wiggled the chicken doll around, twisting his throat and pursing his lips—even widening his eyes—to imitate a chicken’s cry.

Monica watched the impressive act, her mouth hanging open. Eventually, the man wiped the sweat off his brow, looking quite pleased with himself.

“Heh-heh. Did you like my chicken impression? It’s my secret weapon. Used to make my crying little sister burst out laughing when we were kids.” He grinned, then asked, “So, runt, are you lost?”

“Um, not exactly, but I am, um, looking for someone...”

“Who is it? They in costume?”

“He has blond hair...and, um, he’s in an underworld watchman costume...,” answered Monica as she tried to calm her wildly beating heart, her panic finally subsiding.

The man nodded, then looked over the crowd. “Don’t see anyone like that around here. Ah, well. I’ll look for him with ya, so quit cryin’, all right? No need for that. It just don’t sit right with me, makin’ a girl your age cry.”

“Thank...thank you...,” managed Monica through her sniffing.

The man set off walking, ruffling her hair as he did. Every few steps, he would check to make sure she hadn’t gotten carried away by the crowds. Monica desperately moved her short legs, trying to keep sight of the man’s bandanna lest she lose her way.

After a few minutes of walking, the man looked at the crowd in front of him and said, “Oh!”

Apparently, there was a performance going on in the midst of all the people. Monica was too short to see any of it, but she managed to make out a couple of the lines.

“Please, Princess Mariabell, accept this. It is for you.”

“Ahhh! A black agate, darker than the night sky... There can be no doubt. This is the treasure of our royal family, once stolen by the wicked dragon!”

Monica didn’t have much interest in theater, but the man seemed to think otherwise. He stopped, put his hands under her sides, and easily picked her up. “Look!”

“Hyaaah?!” cried Monica, her entire body going rigid with tension and terror.

The man laughed, pleased with himself. “See? You’ve got a perfect view from up here!”

On the simple raised platform was a man who looked like an adventurer wearing armor and a princess in a dress. They were talking to each other.

“This is *The Adventures of Bartholomew Alexander*. Good book, eh? And I love the main character’s name.”

“Oh,” said Monica noncommittally.

The man set her back down on the ground, then gave her a self-satisfied wink. “My name’s Bartholomeus. Basically the same name as Bartholomew here in Ridill. Pretty cool, huh?”

She had guessed as much from his features, but apparently Bartholomeus wasn’t from Ridill. Judging by his name, he might have been from the Empire.

But as she stood thinking, she was once again nearly carried off by the crowds. Bartholomeus quickly grabbed her by the collar of her coat. “Whoa, there. Keep your wits about you, or the souls of the dead’ll drag you to the underworld. They say the dead come back tonight, ya know.”

His eyes shot open, and he thrust out his jaw in an expression meant to strike fear. He seemed to put so much energy into every little thing he did—like when he’d imitated a chicken earlier.

When Monica gave a start and locked up, he cackled.

“We’ve got a festival back home kinda like this. The dead come out to play—or, well, to settle old scores. We wear scary masks to frighten away any that would try an’ attack us.”

Different lands had different cultures. The idea of threatening the souls of the dead fascinated Monica.

Bartholomeus looked over at the bells adorning the streets and narrowed his eyes. “That festival’s fun and all, but... Bells to mourn the dead and send ’em off, eh? That’s a good tradition.”

As he spoke, he did so with a serious thoughtfulness. *Is there someone he wants to send off as well?* thought Monica idly, following his gaze to the bells.

How many people could properly say their good-byes to a loved one in their dying moments? How many could build a proper grave for them, offer flowers and prayers, and mourn their passing? In times of war and famine, there must have been many who couldn't. Perhaps their wishes and prayers had created these traditions.

Monica knew the pain of not being able to say good-bye—of not being able to mourn someone's death properly.

Father...

If ringing those bells was a way to mourn the dead, then it was also a form of salvation for those who had been left behind.

"Uh-oh. Looks like the play's about to end," said Bartholomeus. "Everyone's gonna start moving. Don't get lost, runt!"

"O-okay!"

As Monica hurried to catch up to the man, someone hit her in the shoulder. Without thinking too much about it, she turned around—and fell silent.

Standing behind her was a tall young man wearing an underworld watchman costume. He had brilliant blond hair that swayed in the night breeze, and the body beneath his cloak was perfectly balanced—the golden ratio.

"Hey, there. So this is where you were. I've been looking all over," said the underworld watchman calmly, a grin on his face.

"Pri— Mmmph!"

The costumed boy quickly put a black-gloved hand to her lips before she could shout the word. Bartholomeus looked dubiously between him and Monica, but a moment later, his expression cleared.

"Oh, wait. That the guy you were looking for?"

"U-um, well..." Monica was covered in a cold sweat now. Her gaze wandered.

"Yeah, that's right," the boy replied. "Thanks so much for keeping an eye on her."

"Hey, no problem at all," replied the man happily. "No getting lost again, runt."

Got it?" He laughed, then waved to Monica before disappearing into the crowds.

Left behind, she awkwardly looked back up at the underworld watchman. That radiant blond hair and those long, slender limbs... Then he used a gloved hand to remove his mask, revealing a beautiful face with a gentle sweetness to it.

Standing before her was the second prince and the very person she was supposed to be guarding—Felix Arc Ridill. She had wanted to find and watch over him in secret, but instead he'd found her.

Wh-what now...? She wailed to herself, still drenched in cold sweat.

Felix crouched a little and met her gaze. "Was that someone you know?"

"No, well, I got lost, and he spoke to me..."

"You shouldn't trust people you've just met so easily. There are plenty of villains out there who would use the cover of the festival to commit their evil deeds."

The prince had a point, but there was something more important Monica needed to ask him. "Um, what are you, uh, doing here...?"

"Can't you tell?"

Monica gave him a close look up and down, making sure not to miss anything. His costume was very elaborate. "You, um, look like you're...enjoying the festivities," she ventured.

"That's right."

She stole a glance around them. Still no guards in sight. *Why is the prince at a festival without any bodyguards? Oof, my stomach's starting to hurt...* She tried to be inconspicuous as she pressed a hand to it.

"And what about you?" he asked. "You looked more like you were searching for someone than enjoying the festival. Who were you looking for, I wonder?"

Monica's face stiffened in surprise. Had Felix noticed her wandering the crowds? Had he been watching her? For a moment, she considered lying to him by saying she'd come with Isabelle. But Isabelle would be the one to suffer if he

saw through her lie.

“I... I’m by myself. I wasn’t with anyone.”

“You’re telling me you came here to have fun all by yourself?” His eyes narrowed into a teasing look; he must know she was lying.

Of course he’d be suspicious. He knew how withdrawn she always was. If someone else hadn’t invited her, she’d never have come to a festival.

He suspects something’s up. I have to think of an excuse. Something that would make coming to the festival alone not seem strange... A reason...

And so the Silent Witch, a Sage renowned for being one of the greatest minds in the kingdom, racked her incredibly powerful brain for all it was worth in order to think of an excuse.

“I—I, um... There’s actually something I’m hiding from you.”

“Yes?” asked Felix, seeming faintly amused.

Monica balled her hands into fists and raised one corner of her mouth in an effort to imitate the awful expression she always saw Louis make. Her whole body was trembling as she tried her best to act tough. Then she made a bold declaration.

“To tell the truth, um, I’m a delinquent!”

“.....”

“So, yes! I came here all by myself to enjoy the nightlife!”

Felix remained silent for several seconds, his face expressionless. But then he burst out laughing so hard, his shoulders shook. “A delinquent... So you’re a delinquent... Heh-heh. I see. Then you’re like me. We’re fellow delinquents.”

“Y-yes! Fellow delinquents!”

“Then I’ve got a suggestion. What do you say we stick together and stay out late on the town? It’s more fun the more people you have, so it will be twice as fun together.”

That was the best proposition Monica could have hoped for. Now she could be his bodyguard in plain sight. “I, um, would like that! Thank you!”

She tucked all thoughts about the magical dedication away in a corner of her mind. Protecting Felix was more important right now. She bowed to him in a very un-delinquent-like way.



Felix started chuckling again. It wasn't his usual calm, gentle laughter, though. He wasn't trying to hide how much fun he was having. "While we're here, call me Ike. Got it?"

"Um...Lord Ike?" Was that supposed to be a play on his middle name, Arc?

As Monica was whispering the unfamiliar name to herself—*Lord Ike, Lord Ike*—Felix pressed his index finger to her lips. "Not *Lord* Ike. Just Ike. We're fellow delinquents, right, Monica?"

"But I..." She trailed off, troubled.

Felix reached out a hand to her and said, in an amused tone, "Let's be off, then, Monica. The night may be young, but it passes in a flash. Let's party hard while we have the chance!"

He put his mask back on, took the bewildered Monica's hand, and started walking. Despite the crowds, he managed to slip by everyone, seeming much more accustomed to this than she was.

"So where do you usually hang out?"

"...Huh?"

Felix looked at her with a grin that seemed more teasing than usual.

Monica racked her brain to try and think of what people did for fun in town. For someone who generally stayed in both day and night fiddling with numbers and magic formulae, "hanging out" was unknown territory for her. Especially at night like this. Why did people go out at night?

"As a delinquent, you must be quite used to fooling around at night," prompted Felix. "What sort of shops strike your fancy?"

"Um, well... That is..."

After a bit of stammering, she had an epiphany. She'd just experienced this sort of "fooling around" a couple of hours ago! And it was the kind only nobles could experience—not commoners! It was doubtless a model answer for the question of what a Serendia Academy student might do out at night. Her eyes sparkled like she'd just solved a complex equation.

Confidently, she answered, “I partake in feasting and debauchery surrounded by beautiful young men!”

At last, Felix broke out into such uproarious laughter he had to hold onto his sides. Monica watched him in a daze. This kind of behavior from Felix was usually unthinkable.

Finally, the prince took off his mask and wiped his tears. “If *that’s* what you’re into, I can escort you to an establishment of very high repute.”

“No, I don’t, well... I’m, um, already full, so...” After all, she had just been waited on by beautiful young men at the Starseer Witch’s mansion. “Pri—er, Lord I—er...Mister? Ike, we should—”

“Just Ike.”

“...Oof. I-Ike, I’ll, um, go wherever you’re going,” she said, stumbling over her words. Then she sneezed and began to shiver.

Even with the heat of the festivities, the town was still chilly thanks to the nighttime autumn wind—it was nearly winter. A lot of people she saw walking around had costumes made of fur, which looked very warm.

Felix returned his mask to his face and walked out in front of Monica again. “Let’s get you something warmer to wear first. Come along.”

* * *

Parting ways with the lost little runt, Bartholomeus thought to himself, *Ah, I always feel nice after doin’ a good deed*. Feeling refreshed, he made his way into the venue where the ceremony was to be held. Which was, of course, a crime.

The dedication was to take place in the town’s largest church—specifically the square in front of the building. Security around the church was strict, but Bartholomeus loudly bragged he’d come to do repairs on the altar and strode right inside. He had actually been asked to repair this church’s plumbing and fence in the past, and since he was wearing a craftsman’s garb at the moment, nobody doubted him.

Most importantly, he hadn’t come here to steal anything. He just wanted to get a nice, close look at this so-called ancient magic item. Repeating this to

himself made him bold, which was probably why the guards hadn't been suspicious.

And since he'd come to do repairs here before, he knew the church's layout already. *If they want to keep the item safe, it'll probably be with the sacred utensils—in the little room to the side of the altar.*

Keeping his steps quiet, Bartholomeus snuck across the church. He reached the little room shockingly easily, not even passing anyone on the way. Was everyone busy enjoying the festival?

Anyone more used to trespassing would have considered the lax security suspect, but Bartholomeus was optimistic. *That's karma for you!* he thought as he opened the door to the room.

The door wasn't locked. Unbothered, Bartholomeus's only thought was, *I sure am lucky today!* as he set foot into the room.

There were no windows, so it was pitch-black inside. Bartholomeus lit the lantern he'd brought with him and illuminated the interior. In front of a shelf storing all the little items for use during services was a small table, and on it was a box. It stood out right away.

"Ha-ha! Bingo."

Bartholomeus put his lantern on the table and took a closer look at the box. It was decorated with jewels and just big enough to hold in both hands. It wasn't locked, either.

He opened the lid. Inside, resting on a velvet setting, was an elaborate metalwork bracelet and matching ring connected by a thin chain. It had an old-fashioned design, where the gold chain and jeweled decorations were meant to rest on the back of your hand.

"So this is the ancient magic item...!"

In his excitement, Bartholomeus picked up Starweaving Mira and held it up to his lantern. He gave the exquisite chain a little shake and heard it jingle—and mixed in with the sound of the chain, the rich, full voice of a woman vibrated the air around him.

“My beloved...”

“Wah-ha! These things really do have a sense of presence, eh—? Wait, did I just hear a voice?”

“Oh, oh, my beloved. You’ve come to save me from my imprisonment, haven’t you?”

Bartholomeus’s remark overlapped with the woman’s voice. He was hearing it from down at his hands. In his shock, he tried to let go of the item. Unfortunately, his hand moved on its own, picking up the bracelet and passing his right wrist through it.

“What’s goin’ on here...? I can’t control my arm...”

The bracelet had looked small to him, but as his hand went through it, the item grew in size. And once it moved past the joint, it shrank back down, changing its form to clamp perfectly onto his skin.

Then his left hand picked up the ring connected to the bracelet and slipped it onto his finger. It fit perfectly. The white-starred ruby embedded in the chain flashed eerily.

“...I will never again let you go. I swear it. Oh, my beloved. I love you. I love you so much.”

A red sigil appeared on his middle finger—the seal of a contract. The magic item had acknowledged him as its user. Even with his limited knowledge, he could tell things were going south very quickly. At this point, he wouldn’t be able to claim the only thing he’d stolen was a glance.

“And now, my beloved, it is time for us to elope.”

His right hand—the one now encased in Starweaving Mira—lifted against his will and pulled the rest of him out of the room. Once he’d exited into the chapel, his right arm lifted even higher. As if pulled by the hand of an invisible god, Bartholomeus’s body lifted off after it...

“Gyaaaaahhhhhhh!”

He screamed as his body burst through the chapel’s stained glass window, shattering it, and flew outside.



CHAPTER 9

A Kind Ghost

After telling Monica they were going to find her some warmer clothing, Felix took her to an especially extravagant two-story building on a main street. As they walked through the brilliantly decorated door, she was met with the scents of flowers arranged in ornate vases and perfume, creating a bewitching mixture.

From the prince's suggestion, she'd assumed they'd be going to some sort of clothing store. But it was very clear, even to Monica, that this place did not deal in clothes.

What this shop offered its patrons was a thrilling time with beautifully adorned women.

"B-b-but, b-but—!"

"Are you trying to imitate a chicken?" asked Felix, tilting his head in confusion.

Monica shook her head and desperately tried to get her voice to work.

"But this place, it's not..."

"This is Madam Cassandra's establishment," he answered, removing his mask as a woman appeared from the back of the shop. Her cherry-blond hair was loosely tied, and she wore a dress that exposed a bold amount of her shoulders and chest.

The woman smiled like a cat who had just found her next meal. She went up to Felix and, clinging to his neck, laid a passionate kiss on his cheek. "Oh, sir! It's been so long," she said. "You haven't been coming at all recently. We've been so lonely."

"Hey, Doris. Sorry about that—things have been pretty busy."

"As long as you ask for me tonight, mm? Now that you're here, I'll cancel all my other appointments."

Felix returned the kiss on Doris's cheek and answered smoothly, "Sorry, but I actually need to speak with Madam Cassandra first."

"Hmm?" Doris, finally noticing Monica, moved her neck to give the girl a once over while still clinging closely to Felix. There was no hostility in the woman's eyes—she was simply evaluating Monica's worth.

"Hmm. For someone you brought, I doubt she'll attract many patrons...", murmured Doris, looking up at Felix. "Well, no matter. Madam Cassandra is in the back. Come on—this way."

Doris linked her right arm through Felix's left and began to walk. When Monica hesitated, the woman called to her in exasperation, "What are you idling about for? His other arm is free, you know!"

"...Huh?"

The woman beckoned for Monica to come over and positioned her at Felix's right side. Then she grabbed Monica's hand and passed it through his right arm before finally moving back to the prince's left and linking arms with him again.

"This is how you link arms! And push your chest into him more... Oh, hmm, I suppose you don't have much of a chest to begin with."

What are they trying to make me do? wondered Monica, casting a troubled look up at Felix.

Felix, clearly suppressing a laugh, said, "We'll go say hello to the madam first."

"R-right...", answered Monica vaguely.

Her arm still linked with Felix's—well, it was more like she was hanging on to him with her hand at this point—they began to walk. She felt like a lost child being escorted.

Madam Cassandra's establishment was one of the more thriving businesses in the area, and it didn't matter where you looked—the pillars, the door decorations, the rugs—the entire place was so glamorous, it made her eyes hurt.

Mary Harvey's mansion had been luxurious as well, but Monica felt certain it had been considerably classier.

Eventually, they came to a door at the end of the hallway, and Doris stopped in front of it. “Madam!” she called. “Madam Cassandra! I’ve got a good one here to see you, for a change!”

“Come in,” a woman’s voice, hoarse from drinking, called from inside the room.

Doris happily opened the door and brought Felix and Monica inside. While the hallway on the way here had been ornate, this room was on another level: rugs with lots of red coloring, velvet curtains, decorations and tassels using plenty of gold and silver thread... And on the extravagant cabriole-legged sofa in the center of the room rested a woman.

Her gray hair was done up beautifully, and she wore a vivid scarlet dress and wide-brimmed hat. She looked a little too old to be considered middle-aged but far too full of life to be called an elderly woman.

Her sharp, glinting eyes locked on to Felix as her lips, bright red with lipstick, curled up into a wide smile.

“Oh, hello, sir,” she drawled. “It *has* been a while. So long, I should say, that our girls were starting to lose their motivation. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do.”

“I do apologize, Madam,” answered the prince. “I’ve had much business to attend to of late.”

What *business* was he supposed to be up to? Felix was a student. Though looking at him now, nobody would suspect it—he was far too at home here in the midst of the nightlife.

I probably shouldn’t say anything unnecessary..., thought Monica, taking a step back to hide in Felix’s shadow.

But just then, the woman called Madam Cassandra gestured at her with her chin. “Who’s the girlie?”

“I was hoping you could pick out some clothing for her.”

Oh, thought Monica. So they *were* here to get her warmer clothes. Most regular clothing shops would have been closed by now anyway. If you wanted

an outfit, paying money at an establishment like this was quicker.

“Ah, in that case, leave it to me,” said Doris, grabbing Monica by the wrist. “This way!”

“Um! I, ummm...!” Monica panicked, looking between Felix and Doris.

The prince offered her a smile and a wave of his hand. “Get her to pick out something cute.”

“Um, well, er...!”

“Come on, time’s a-wastin’!”

Doris yanked on Monica’s wrist and began to walk with large strides, practically dragging her off into another room.

After watching Doris pull Monica away, Felix turned back to Madam Cassandra and took a seat on the sofa across from her.

Opening up a locked drawer filled with small items, she removed a few envelopes and placed them in front of the prince. “From the nobles you met here at the shop,” she explained.

“You have my thanks, as always, Madam.”

Felix took the envelopes and tucked them away. The nobles whose names were written on them had a certain thing in common—all of them were under Duke Clockford’s influence, and all of them harbored some measure of dissatisfaction toward the man. Some were even anxious to rebel.

Madam Cassandra, sharp as she was, had surely put two and two together.

“I’m not about to dig into your past or identity at this point,” she said. “...But will this be your last visit?”

“Most likely yes.”

She sighed. “We’ll be very sad to see you, and your money, go.”

Felix placed a bag stuffed with gold coins in front of her. “Please use this to throw a fantastic banquet tonight. One lively enough to match the bells guiding the souls of the dead.”

“You will, of course, be at this banquet, yes?”

“Unfortunately, I have other things to do. I only need to borrow a bed to sleep on for tonight.”

Looking unhappy, Madam Cassandra took out a pipe and placed it between her scarlet lips. “It’s your last night here. Invite any of the girls you want to your bed.”

“I came out fully prepared to take you up on that offer,” explained the prince, “but I’ve unexpectedly made a new friend to go out on the town with. I’d like to prioritize her tonight.”

“...Oh?” Her eyes, which had been narrowed in displeasure, opened wide, and she blinked. “You don’t mean that plain girlie from before...?”

“A friend of mine,” answered Felix smoothly.

Madam Cassandra put a hand to her forehead and looked up at the ceiling. “What in the world? I thought for sure you meant to sell her to us...”

Just as she said this, they heard a pattering from out in the hallway. Then the door opened, and Doris flew in, carrying Monica under her arm.

“Madam! Madam! Maaadam!” she cried.

Monica’s eyes were vacant, and she was muttering numbers under her breath.

Felix’s eyes went wide at the sight before him. Doris had put Monica in a thin, lingerie-like dress—the kind the ladies here wore. It showed off a lot of skin and looked great on women with more voluptuous figures. But on a thin girl like Monica, it only emphasized what she didn’t have. She looked colder than ever.

The rich wine color of the fabric simply made her pallid complexion stand out, and one of the shoulder straps had already fallen halfway down her shoulder, dangerously close to revealing what little chest was there.

As Felix looked on in shock, Doris scratched her head and apologized.

“Sorry, sir. Since you brought her here to sell to us, I tried to teach her how to please a man with a little demonstration... Then she suddenly got like this. What is she even *doing*? Would hitting her in the head fix it?”

Doris’s demonstration had evidently been a bit too stimulating for Monica,

and the girl had taken another little trip to the world of numbers.

“I apologize, Doris,” said Felix. “I should have given you clearer instructions.”

“What? You came to sell her to us, right?” said Doris. “I mean, I can’t imagine she has any relatives. She’s just a little too skinny. I don’t think she’ll find many customers like this, but don’t worry—you can leave her with me. I’ll fix her up and make sure she gets the hang of it. I’ll take perfect care of her.”

“No, that’s not what I...”

As Felix tried to clear up the misunderstanding with Doris, Monica continued muttering numbers, her gaze totally blank.

Squish.

Monica came to as she felt something soft touch her cheek.

“Oh! A paw...!”

She was certain that Nero was squeezing her face with his soft little feet. But when she looked around, she wasn’t in her mountain cabin or in her attic room. Wherever she was, the amount of red and gold was beginning to make her eyes hurt. And when she turned to look at the source of the sensation on her left cheek, she saw Felix gazing at her with an expression she found difficult to describe.

“Back in the real world?” he asked.

“Pri-Pri-Pri-Pri—”

Before she could say *Prince*, Felix pressed his index finger to her mouth. Monica’s eyes swiveled about, trying to get a read on the situation. She was currently sitting on a magnificent sofa, leaning against Felix. On another sofa across from them was Madam Cassandra, with Doris waiting nearby.

When her eyes met Doris’s, the woman twirled a finger through her cherry-blond hair and gave an apologetic grin. “Sorry about all that,” she said. “I thought for sure he’d come to sell you to us.”

“O-oh...”

And that was when Monica finally realized what she was wearing—a thin,

wine-red, lingerie-like dress. Doris had forced her to put it on a few minutes ago.

“Choo!” She sneezed.

Doris laughed. “Seriously, sorry! I’ll lend you the warmest furs I have, okay? And you could probably do with some gloves, too, huh?”

“Um, if you can just...give me my clothes back, that would be— *Hk-choo!*”

When Monica sneezed again, the dress—its strap already slipping—fell down to about her waist. She lifted the strap back up with a “whoops” and pulled it over her shoulder again.

Felix and Doris stared at her, dumbstruck.

Madam Cassandra removed the pipe from her lips and furrowed her brow. “She’s an odd one.”

“Ummm, can I have my clothes, please...?”

“Doris, give them back.” Madam Cassandra gestured with her chin.

“Got it,” said Doris, beckoning for Monica to follow. When the girl hesitated, Doris scratched her cheek, a little troubled. “I’m just giving you your clothes back, that’s all. Come on.”

“Oh, um, okay...”

“Although if you want to know how to make *him* happy, I can give you a few tips on the sly.”

Monica shook her head so hard, it seemed like it might fly off. Doris cackled.

After that, Doris returned Monica’s navy dress and white coat, then threw a fur cape over her shoulders and lent her some gloves. Finally, she passed her one of the belled ash-wood staffs everyone at the festival had been carrying. The cape was dark brown, and the hood had fake animal ears sewn onto it for decoration. *This must be a festival costume*, thought Monica.

She put up the hood and gave the sewn-on ears a couple of tugs. Slender and tapered at the end, they were a good bit shorter than a rabbit’s. *Horse ears?* she wondered.

She'd heard most of the festival costumes were of animals that walked on land, as they were all subjects of the King of the Earth Spirits. Horses were chief among them. *They're probably horse ears*, she thought, convinced.

Felix grinned. "Ever the little squirrel," he said.

"Huh?!" Monica blurted out. "I, um, I think these are horse ears..."

"I'm looking at a little squirrel."

Even Doris and Madam Cassandra agreed she was a squirrel.

Monica's eyebrows drooped as she looked up at Felix. "You said you wouldn't call me that anymore..."

"Sorry, sorry," said the prince. "Why don't we get going, Monica?"

Felix subtly held his left arm out toward her. She knew the right thing to do was to link her arm with his, like Doris had just taught her. Unfortunately, there was quite a height difference between the two of them: Monica was petite, and Felix was rather tall. After puzzling over it for a few moments, she used the hand not holding the staff to grab his sleeve instead. This way, she wouldn't have to worry about getting lost.

Felix didn't offer any comment. He just started walking, matching his stride to hers.

As they left Madam Cassandra's establishment, Felix put his mask back on and headed for the main street. He didn't even pause to think about it—he must really have been used to going out at night like this.

"There's a shop I want to visit," he said, "but why don't we take a little walk first? It's actually pretty fun to look at all the stalls and open-air shops."

Felix then picked a street with a lot of such shops and started walking. In addition to stalls providing refreshments like meat skewers and fruit juice, there were a few others dealing in foreign rugs and accessories.

"Hello, sir!" called one of the dealers. "Come have a look at my shop. I've got a lot of good accessories here! Why not get a cute bracelet for the girl?"

"I suppose I'll have a look," said Felix, stopping to peruse the items lining the stall.

The stallkeeper smiled and rubbed his hands together like he was about to greet a VIP. “We’ve got the best of the best here,” he said. “All of them were blessed by a very famous mage.”

“Really?” asked Felix. “Are they magic items?”

“Well, yes, something along those lines.”

Apparently, calling them *charms* or *blessings* went over better with young people.

The man started explaining how this necklace would make people more attracted to you or how that ring would help ward off disasters, his tone very serious. Each of the products was lit up by lanterns hanging from the eaves and glittered beautifully. The dealer was probably well aware that selling things in the dark of night made it more difficult to tell expensive articles from cheap imitations.

Monica quietly scanned through the wares. *None of them seems to be functional as a magic item...* Things that *looked* like magic symbols had been engraved on ring settings and clasps, but none of them was real.

Felix probably realized this as well. He was doing a good job at acting interested, but she didn’t see any enthusiasm in his eyes as he perused the goods. He really was just having a look; that was all.

Monica’s gaze drifted past the accessories, only to stop on a broach near the back. This was the first item she’d seen with a real magic formula engraved into it.

A simple barrier, thought Monica. *Not that precise, but...*

The stallkeeper noticed her staring and raised his voice, trying to sound excited. “Oh, you have a sharp eye, miss! This broach was specially made, unlike the others.”

He paused there, then squatted down a little and lowered his voice like he didn’t want anyone else to hear. “Would you believe it? One of the Seven Sages made this. The Gem Mage, to be specific.”

“Huh...?” Monica felt her heart skip a beat at the words *Seven Sages*.

Felix put a finger to his chin. “The Gem Mage Emanuel Darwin... I’ve heard he’s a genius at creating magic tools.”

“You sure know your stuff,” replied the stallkeeper. “You’re right! Any item made by the Gem Mage would sell for as much as a house in the royal capital if obtained through the usual routes. But I can give it to you at a much lower price... What do you think?”

“May I see it?” asked Felix.

“Sure, go right ahead!” said the stallkeeper amicably, putting a cloth around the broach and handing it to the prince.

Felix took it and brought the gemstone embedded in it up to the light—probably to verify that a magic formula was floating inside. And it was. Behind the formula, the name “Emanuel Darwin” was carved in very small letters.

Thinking logically, it had to be a fake. The magic formula wasn’t very precise, and no magic item made by one of the Seven Sages would ever be found at a shop like this. But it was the ornamentation that caught Monica’s attention. She’d seen a broach almost exactly like this one somewhere else.

It looks like Lord Cyril’s broach.

Cyril Ashley’s body tended to accumulate mana more easily than others, so he always wore a magical broach to absorb the mana back out of his body and release it. In fact, Monica had physically held that broach in the past, and so she had no doubt.

Lord Cyril’s broach had the Gem Mage’s name engraved in it, too. And it hadn’t had any protective formulas.

The broach in Felix’s hands was imbued with only a rough defensive barrier. The two items were *very* similar—both in their style and the peculiarities of their magic formulae.

“Actually, I like this,” said Felix. “I’ll take it.”

“Heh-heh! You’re a generous one, sir. Thank you, thank you!”

After paying far more than seemed right for a street stall, Felix took the broach. Then his blue eyes shifted behind his mask to look at Monica.

“Monica,” he said, “are there any accessories you would like? If anything catches your eye, I’ll buy it for you.”

“...No, I’m fine,” she said, shaking her head sluggishly.

Felix bent down a little to peer into her face. “You were wearing makeup the day of the chess competition, weren’t you? It looked very good on you.”

“Oh.”

“Would you allow me to give you an accessory that would have suited you as well?”

Felix’s sweet, honeyed whispers would have made most noblewomen red in the cheeks. Monica’s heart, however, didn’t budge. She wondered why that was and came up with a reason. Awkwardly, she asked him, “Um, do you remember...the first time we met?”

“In the old gardens. You’d dropped all your berries.”

“When you picked them up for me, I was...really, really happy.”

Having just arrived at the academy, Monica hadn’t been close with anyone. She hadn’t known right from left back then. That was why the ribbon Lana had given her and the berries Felix had picked up for her had felt like such treasures—enough that she almost hadn’t wanted to eat them.

“Um, I can’t explain it very well... But if you were to buy me an, um, accessory right now, I don’t think I’d be...as happy as the time with the berries.”

“...Ah,” said Felix, his voice somehow lonely, its tone different from the one he used when sitting in the student council president’s chair.

Monica started to feel very guilty. Whatever the reason, she’d flatly refused his gesture of goodwill.

Panicking, she continued. “Um, and anyway, I only recently got interested in fashion, so I’m a complete beginner! And, well...I think accessories are still too much for me... Yes, they’re for advanced fashion practitioners, and I’m just not ready!”

Felix’s eyes went wide in surprise behind his mask. As Monica played with her fingers, wondering if she’d been rude, a faint smile crossed his lips. “We’ll leave

it at that, then,” he said, heading to the next stall over.

This one appeared to be selling baked sweets. They were flat and round, about the size of her palm, and had an intricate design pressed into the surface.

“Those sweets...have such pretty designs,” remarked Monica, locking on to the patterns rather than the food itself.

Felix laughed. “They’re traditional sweets for the Bell-Ringing Festival. You break them in half to eat them.” He bought one of them, split it in two, and gave one half to Monica. “You’ll let me treat you to this at least, right?”

“Ummm, y-yes, thank you...”

Inside the bread-like dough, sweetened with honey, was a generous filling of dried grapes, figs, and walnuts. As she took a few bites to disguise the awkwardness she felt, a pair of fingers reached in from the side and plucked a bit of fruit from Monica’s face.

“There was some on your cheek,” said Felix.

The moment his fingers touched her mouth, she unconsciously tensed up and gave a violent start.

Probably hearing the stifled shriek that shook her throat, Felix commented a little sadly, “You said you weren’t afraid of horses, but you’re afraid of people, aren’t you?”

He was exactly right.

Monica wasn’t scared of animals or bugs, but humans frightened her. And that had been the case since long before she’d enrolled at Minerva’s and met Bernie.

Tall men were the worst. Whenever one so much as lifted his hand, visions of it coming down on her would flash through her mind and cause her legs to give out in fear. The same thing had happened when she’d bumped into Bartholomeus. She knew logically that not everyone would get violent with her, but her body reacted anyway. Her head would go blank, dominated by fear.

I always ruin it whenever anyone tries to be nice to me..., she thought, her face clouding over with guilt. Voice trembling, she managed a stilted “...sorry.”

Felix didn't criticize her. Instead, he constructed a gentle smile. "If you really are frightened of people, you can just think of me as a ghost. After all, the spirits of the dead visit our world tonight—that's why they're ringing the bells."

He reached toward the staff in Monica's hand. Hanging from the end of the ash-wood staff Doris had lent her was a cute little golden bell. Felix poked the bell to shake it a little. The clear jingling was meant to mourn and guide the spirits of the dead who had wandered into the festival.

"Your friend Ike is actually a ghost who doesn't exist. So he can't hurt you."

His joking tone—and the blue eyes behind his mask—were sad but full of kindness.

Monica's mouth popped open and closed. She thought she should say something. But she couldn't think of anything fitting, so her puffs of white breath simply disappeared into the night sky.

"I'm a little thirsty," said Felix. "I'll go and get us some fruit juice, so wait right there." He turned, the hem of his cloak fluttering, and disappeared into the crowd.

I have to follow him, she thought. I'm his bodyguard. But just as she took a panicked step forward, she heard a voice from behind her.

"Silent Witch," it said.

Surprised, Monica turned around to find a beautiful woman in maid attire—the wind spirit Ryn.

She continued in her usual impassive, flat tone. "Would this be a proper situation to use the 'don't lay a hand on my woman' tactic?"

That was the first thing out of her mouth. Apparently Felix, in costume, had looked to Ryn like bad news—a man trying to bully her.

If the spirit dressed up in those showy clothes from the chess tournament and staged a repeat performance now, it would be disastrous. Monica rejected her proposal in a hurry. "N-no! That's the prince!"

"Oh my." Ryn's voice never had any intonation, but she seemed surprised, at least. She put a hand to her chin in a rather dramatic show of thoughtfulness,

quirking her head to the right as she did. Three solid seconds later, she returned her head to its normal position. “In that case, will you be continuing to guard Prince Felix tonight?”

“Y-yes. If you could keep your distance and provide support, um, that would be great...”

“Very well, then— Oh?” Noticing something, Ryn looked up. Monica followed her gaze and spotted a bird with its wings spread flying through the air despite the time of day—and heading right for them. Her eyes widened.

Eventually, the bird glided down, came to a rest on Ryn’s head, and hooted. It was an owl. And upon closer inspection, she noticed a ring around its foot holding a tube.

Monica recognized the star seal on the item. “Could this be the Starseer Witch’s familiar...? Um, Miss Ryn, could you squat down a little?”

“Certainly.”

Nervously, Monica reached for the tube stuck to the owl’s foot. Inside it was a small, folded-up letter. The writing on the paper was so fancy, you’d think it was an invitation to the royal palace—but instead, it said this:

“Someone’s made off with Starweaving Mira. Could you help a girl out? Pweeeez?”

“Wha...? Whaaaaat?!”

Monica studied the letter again, her lips quivering. Despite the beautiful handwriting and casual phrasing, this was a matter of grave importance.

Ryn, peering at the letter from the side with the owl still on her head, seemed to agree. “This appears to be an emergency,” she muttered.

Frankly, Monica had no idea what to do. Both guarding Felix and recovering the stolen item were important missions. Starweaving Mira was capable of absorbing the mana from a very large area of land and converting it into a powerful attack spell.

If a bad person used Starweaving Mira to attack the town...

Just the thought of it sent a shiver down her spine. On a night like this, the

item could easily level the whole of Corlaption.

Mr. Louis said the seal has already been removed. There's no telling when it might be used...

It was Monica's duty as a Sage to protect the town from this magical threat. *And above all...*, thought Monica, putting a hand to her chest and closing her eyes. She could hear the jingling of bells all over town—the sound meant to mourn and guide the spirits of the dead. *Above all, there are people here who will find salvation in mourning...like me.*

She couldn't allow the festival to be ruined. Slowly, she fixed her gaze ahead. The hesitation left her eyes. "Miss Ryn," she said, "are you able to sense its mana?"

"No," replied the spirit. "I am excellent at picking out noises, but not very skilled at mana detection."

Monica could use magecraft that would allow her to sense mana. That said, detection spells were so complicated, some people made it their life's work. Not only was it difficult to cast the spell itself, you needed a sharp intuition to understand the information it gave you.

Monica could reproduce the spell with perfect precision, but she'd never been very good at analyzing the results. In fact, those from the Magic Corps were much better at it than she was, given all their practical combat experience.

But I have to do it.

She closed her eyes and focused, then triggered the detection spell.

Behind her eyelids, a scene like a starry sky filled her vision. The stars were so small she had to strain to pick them out. Each one of them was a mass of mana, and she could discern its quantity and element by the size of the star and its coloration.

Unfortunately, when it came to creatures with large mana capacities—higher dragons and spirits, for example—they would frequently conceal their own power, making them impossible to detect. Many magic items, too, couldn't be detected until they were triggered; that was how Casey's assassination tool,

Spiralflame, had worked.

Starweaving Mira supposedly has the ability to absorb mana. So if I look for a mass that's slowly growing...

Little by little, Monica widened her search area. But the more she did, the easier it was to overlook things.

Sweat broke out on her forehead as she observed the countless stars hovering behind her eyelids. It was like looking at comets flying around the night sky at random. The stars were so small, you had to really focus to see them, and they were flitting all around, so the task demanded a lot of focus.

But among this cluster of stars, Monica managed to find one moving unnaturally. It was traveling awfully fast, from the center of town straight toward its outer limits, growing ever more radiant as it did. It was absorbing the mana in its environment.

“Found you!”

The signal was a good distance away from Monica's current location. And at that speed, the culprit would be out of town before she caught up.

She needed to swiftly retrieve the stolen item, come back here, and continue to protect Felix.

“While I go get the magic item, you stay here and watch the prince, Miss Ryn. Also...” She squeezed her ash-wood staff and set her gaze in the direction she'd be going. There was a tall, thin bell tower in that direction—it would serve as a good landmark. “I want you to shoot me as hard as you can toward that bell tower.”

“I was under the impression you couldn't use flight magecraft, my lady,” replied the spirit.

“I can't. But I could probably manage just the landing... Maybe.” If she could use wind magecraft to cushion her fall, she could probably avoid being injured. In any case, as clumsy as she was, she'd never catch them if she had to run through the crowd. This was the only way to close the distance.

“Very well, my lady. In that case...”

The gorgeous maid nodded her owl-laden head and raised a hand. Wind swirled at Monica's feet, causing her coat hem to flap.

"I will create a soundproof barrier in that region of the sky so you may feel free to scream to your heart's content."

".....Huh?"

"I shall send you there at the highest speed a human body can withstand."

"Oh, um, if you can, please, er, limit the speed to— *Higyaaaaaahhhhhhhh!*"

A moment later, Monica's body launched into the air and hurtled through the sky like a comet.



CHAPTER 10

A Little Squirrel Soaring Through the Night Sky

Isabelle was walking down a stall-lined street in Corlapton, her wildcat-eared hood pulled up, quite satisfied with the baked treat she'd bought just moments ago.

"I'm happy you were able to get one before they sold out," remarked Agatha, her servant and secret escort for the night.

"Yes," replied Isabelle, a big smile on her face as she nodded.

She'd snuck out to festivals before, back in Kerbeck. However, most people in her hometown knew her appearance and would casually call out to her, saying things like, "Oh, Lady Isabelle. Out in secret tonight?" or, "Hey, have one of these treats on the house!" In other words, it was hard to say she was really "sneaking."

This time, however, she was genuinely incognito.

"If only Monica was here," she said. "It would have been even more fun..." Then she shook her head as if to banish the thought. "No, I mustn't be selfish. She's working very hard on her important mission!"

If Monica couldn't come to the festival, Isabelle at least wanted to buy her a souvenir. That was why she was currently browsing the stalls.

The first thing she'd bought upon arriving was one of the traditional round baked sweets adorned with patterns. According to the legend, if you broke it in half and shared it with a friend, you'd be friends forever.

But just as Isabelle was thinking about going home and splitting it with the "sister" she so adored, she heard children arguing in front of her.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire!"

"I'm not lying! I saw it! Really!"

It was a boy of about ten and another boy who looked several years younger. Their faces were so similar, she was almost certain they were siblings. The

younger brother was pointing to the sky.

“I really saw it! It went, *shooooom*! A huge squirrel! It flew over that building there!”

“Squirrels can’t fly. You must have seen a big bird or something.”

“It was a squirrel! It had squirrel ears!” Tears began to form in the younger boy’s eyes.

Isabelle couldn’t bear to watch any more, so she hastened over and interrupted them. “Enough! We’re at a festival. You should be enjoying yourselves, not fighting.”

The younger brother’s eyes widened at her unexpected intrusion, while the older brother raised his eyebrows and stared at her.

But Isabelle wasn’t deterred. Boldly, she took out the traditional baked sweet, wrapped in its paper bag. Then she split it in half and smiled—an especially sweet, pretty smile.

“Eat this and make up, okay?”

The brothers, both red in the face, accepted the baked treat and mumbled their thanks.

A little ways off, Agatha watched over the scene with a warm smile.

* * *

The Silent Witch Monica Everett shot through the sky like a speeding bullet, soaring over the colors and lights of the town.

As she wailed and blubbered pathetically, she kept a tight grip on her ash-wood staff, just barely managing to stay conscious. The cold winds roared, pelting her exposed cheeks. She was very glad she’d borrowed those gloves. Otherwise, her hands would have gone numb with cold and dropped the staff.

Eventually, the bell tower came into view ahead of her. But at the speed she was hurtling through the air, she was almost certainly going to collide with it. Hard.

Without chanting, she cast a wind spell to dampen her momentum, then attempted to ease herself down...but the fear brought on by her current

altitude and speed jumbled her thoughts. While she'd normally have been able to cast the spell with perfect precision, the formula warped in her mind, and she wasn't able to initiate it correctly.

"Eeeeeeee, wah, wah, wah, ahhh-ahhh-ahhh-ahhh, hyawah-wah-wah-wah-waaah!"

Mere moments before ramming into the tower, she managed to get the wind spell to work. As she flipped her body around to get her head away from the structure, her vision spun. She used her boot soles to kick off the tower, changing the direction of her fall and ultimately avoiding a headfirst collision.

Nevertheless, Monica was now keenly aware that using magecraft in such an unstable position was a completely different challenge from using it with her feet solidly planted on the ground. She hadn't been able to focus at all.

Thankfully, the space behind the bell tower—where she was going to land—was a flat area devoid of people.

In that case, if I shoot a wind spell toward the ground, I'll be able to cushion my fall!

She constructed the formula in a frenzy. But just as she was about to unleash the wind toward the ground, she saw the nearby foliage rustle and a man come bursting out.

Tumbling through the air, Monica screamed, "Nooooo! Mooooooooove!"

* * *

"Oh, oh, my beloved! Take me somewhere far, far away...!"

"Uh, I'm pretty sure you're the one carrying *me* far awaaaaay?!"

Starweaving Mira, still attached to Bartholomeus's right hand, continued to drag his body forward. To anyone else, he would seem to be advancing with his hand in the air and his legs basically not moving at all. Some of the passersby mistook him for a street performer and tossed a few coins his way.

And while he would have loved to pick up the bronze coins rolling at his feet, Starweaving Mira didn't seem to care. It just kept tugging him ahead.

When he'd crashed through the chapel window earlier, shards of stained glass

had become lodged in several parts of his body. To make things worse, the item would occasionally pull him quite violently, and he was now covered in scrapes and bruises. Starweaving Mira, however, seemed indifferent to his plight.

“Hey, could you be a little more considerate here?! You’re wrecking your beloved’s good looks!”

“Ah, my beloved. You’ve suffered such a beating, and all to allow me to escape this place...”

Unfortunately, while the magic item appeared to have the ability to speak, its conversation was rather one-sided. *This is really bad*, thought Bartholomeus, cold sweat dripping down his skin. *At this rate, they’re gonna arrest me for stealing this thing!*

All he’d wanted was a little peek—to make replicas as souvenirs and profit off them!

At this point, his only choice was to avoid being seen, destroy the bracelet somewhere deserted, and tear it off his arm. While his right hand was under the item’s control, he could still move his left freely.

Bartholomeus fingered his tool pouch with his left hand, then spoke to Starweaving Mira. “All right, all right. I get it. Why don’t we go somewhere without anyone around and talk about our love? I’m too embarrassed with people nearby...”

“Oh my! A place without anyone around, you say? How bold you are.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.” Bartholomeus managed a fake laugh as Starweaving Mira dragged them away from the crowds.

Right in front of them was a bell tower. The item took him through the greenery planted around the building, aiming for somewhere out of the way.

Bartholomeus was now covered in leaves from crashing through the brush. He spit a couple out of his mouth, then used his left hand to reach for his tool pouch.

“Now we are alone—just you and I, my beloved.”

“Great. Perfect. Now we have all the time we need to talk about...love!”

But just as he pulled out a chisel and swung it down at Starweaving Mira, he heard a shriek from overhead.

“Nooooo! Mooooooove!”

“Eh?”

Bartholomeus looked up and saw the silhouette of a squirrel gripping a staff against the full moon—no, not a squirrel, a small girl. He gaped up at her until a powerful wind from above knocked him away.

“Gyaaah!” he yelped as the wind sent him crashing back into the brush.

Then he saw the girl’s body fall from the sky and bounce a little, as if off an invisible cushion. It was wind magecraft. It would have looked pretty cool if she’d nailed the landing, but she didn’t—after bouncing off the wind cushion, she tumbled to the ground with an “oof!”

“I...I was so scared...,” the girl cried, beginning to sob and whimper as she slowly rose to her feet.

The girl was short, wearing a hood. And when Bartholomeus got a closer look at her, he realized she was the lost little runt he’d helped out earlier that night.

“Wait, you’re that runt,” he said. “...So you’re a mage, huh? But why did you fall from the sky...?”

After executing her wind spell in the nick of time and barely avoiding certain death, Monica looked at the man buried in the foliage.

He had black hair and wore a bandanna—it was Bartholomeus, the same man who had helped her when she’d gotten lost.

She was about to apologize for getting him wrapped up in this, too, when her eyes went wide, and her mouth fell open in surprise.

On the man’s right hand were a bracelet and a ring, attached by a chain. Its golden sheen and the large gemstone on the chain at the back of his hand weren’t things you could find just anywhere.

On a hunch, Monica used her detection spell again—only to see a powerful reaction right in front of her. And it was still absorbing the surrounding mana and expanding.

“Starweaving Mira!” she exclaimed.

Bartholomeus went white.

A woman’s voice came from his right hand. The voice had a uniquely cloying, clinging lilt to it, which took on a pathetic cast as it cried, *“Oh, how terrible! A pursuer has arrived. Let us flee, my beloved!”*

Then the man’s right hand lifted up as though it had a mind of its own. He swore and grabbed a nearby tree branch with his left hand to hold himself down.

“Please help me out!” he shouted. “I’m no thief! This thing just attached itself to my hand!”

“Huh?!” cried Monica.

“I’m serious! I’m the victim here!” he screamed, face red, spittle flying. He looked desperate.

He didn’t seem to be lying, but Monica still wavered for a moment.

Suddenly, the man’s right hand fell limp to his side.

“...How awful...” The voice sounded like it was about to cry. *“Why would you say something like that, my beloved? ...Oh, oh, I can feel my heart tearing apart...”*

Bartholomeus’s face lit up at the words. “Finally bored of me, eh? Gotcha, gotcha. Then why not just release me now, and—”

“I suppose our bond cannot be fulfilled in this world...”

His hand slowly rose. As he looked on in shock, his body was pulled upward once again by his right hand—higher and higher into the air.

“Let us die together, my beloved.”

“Gyaaah?! It’s so high! Too high, too high! Wait, wait, wait! Okay, it’s my fault! It’s my fault so please reconsider— *Gorf!*”

Bartholomeus’s wailing abruptly cut off. Apparently, as he was flailing his limbs, he’d hit his head against one of the decorative pillars on the bell tower. His eyes rolled back, and his head lolled limply to the side.

Monica was flabbergasted at this string of unexpected developments, but then she recalled what Louis had said.

“Starweaving Mira is one of those items with an interesting story—if its owner is male, it kills him.”

But then, could this be...what he meant?!

Her face blanched. At this rate, Bartholomeus would be killed.

“Wait!” she cried, quickly forming a barrier around the man without chanting.

But a moment later, as Bartholomeus floated there unconscious, several arrows of golden light shot forth from his right hand—from Starweaving Mira—destroying Monica’s barrier.

“Wh-what...?!”

Monica’s barriers weren’t as powerful as Louis’s—he was called “the Barrier Mage” for a reason—but they were still incomparably tougher than an average mage’s. And yet a few of those light arrows had been enough to easily puncture it.

She was dealing with a magic item capable of absorbing mana from the surrounding land, and having witnessed firsthand how powerful its mana arrows were, Monica felt a cold droplet of sweat trickle down her cheek.

“Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee. A fall from this height is sure to send you to the goddess of the underworld painlessly... However.”

Starweaving Mira had a ruby embedded in the chain that rested on the back of its wearer’s hand. On the ruby was a white star pattern, and to Monica, that star felt like an eye—glaring at her.

“If we are to die, it should be somewhere quiet, somewhere private... So let us be off, my beloved.”

Bartholomeus’s body hovered up to the level of the bell tower’s roof, then flew off toward the edge of town.

Oh, what now, what now, what now...?! Monica stood there, at a loss.

Shooting down Starweaving Mira alone with an attack spell would have been

a piece of cake for her. But ancient magic items contained technology that was impossible to replicate in modern times. If she destroyed it, they'd never be able to fix it.

Could there be a way to disable an ancient magic item without destroying it? I've never heard of anyone doing such a thing... And since Starweaving Mira could absorb mana, it wouldn't be possible to exhaust its supply.

As Monica ran out of options, her thoughts wandered further and further. *It has a mind like a human. If I could talk to it, maybe I could persuade it...*

That would be a tall order for Monica, though, who was withdrawn and terrible at speaking. To make matters worse, Starweaving Mira harbored strong, persistent feelings of love for Bartholomeus.

Monica's mind went back to the flowerpot incident at Serendia Academy from when she'd just enrolled. Lady Selma Karsh had committed that crime for the sake of her beloved fiancé. But she'd also been manipulated using mental interference magecraft, so she hadn't been in much of a state to talk down. Starweaving Mira was probably no different.

...Oh, wait... Just then, something occurred to Monica. *If Starweaving Mira has a mind of its own, then...maybe...*

Monica calculated the magic formula in her head.

Theoretically, it...should work. But nobody's ever tried something like this, so I'd say my chances are about fifty-fifty. She decided to give it a shot anyway. She knew if she let Starweaving Mira get away, she'd regret it.

I can't use that kind of spell from a distance. I need to get close...

The magic item—along with Bartholomeus—had flown off through the air, and they were already beyond her reach.

Should I turn back and ask for Miss Ryn's help? But then the prince won't have anyone guarding him, and they might get away in the meantime... Which means there's only one thing to do.

Hand trembling, she squeezed her ash-wood staff and looked up at the sky. And then, in her mind, she pieced together the formula for the spell she hated

so much.

Flight magecraft... How long has it been since I tried this?

She was honestly terrified. If there had been any other option, she would have taken it. But letting Starweaving Mira escape and ruin the festival would be even worse.

Her hand grasped the staff even more tightly as she braced her core.

“Yah!” she cried.

Wind whipped up around her, jingling the bell on the end of her staff.

A moment later, she was up higher than the bell tower. Much higher.

* * *

“It seems it’s begun.”

Mary Harvey, the Starseer Witch, looked out the church window and up into the night sky.

The sky was full of light from the festival lanterns below, and it was harder than usual to see the stars. Still, she continued to focus her eyes and read their patterns.

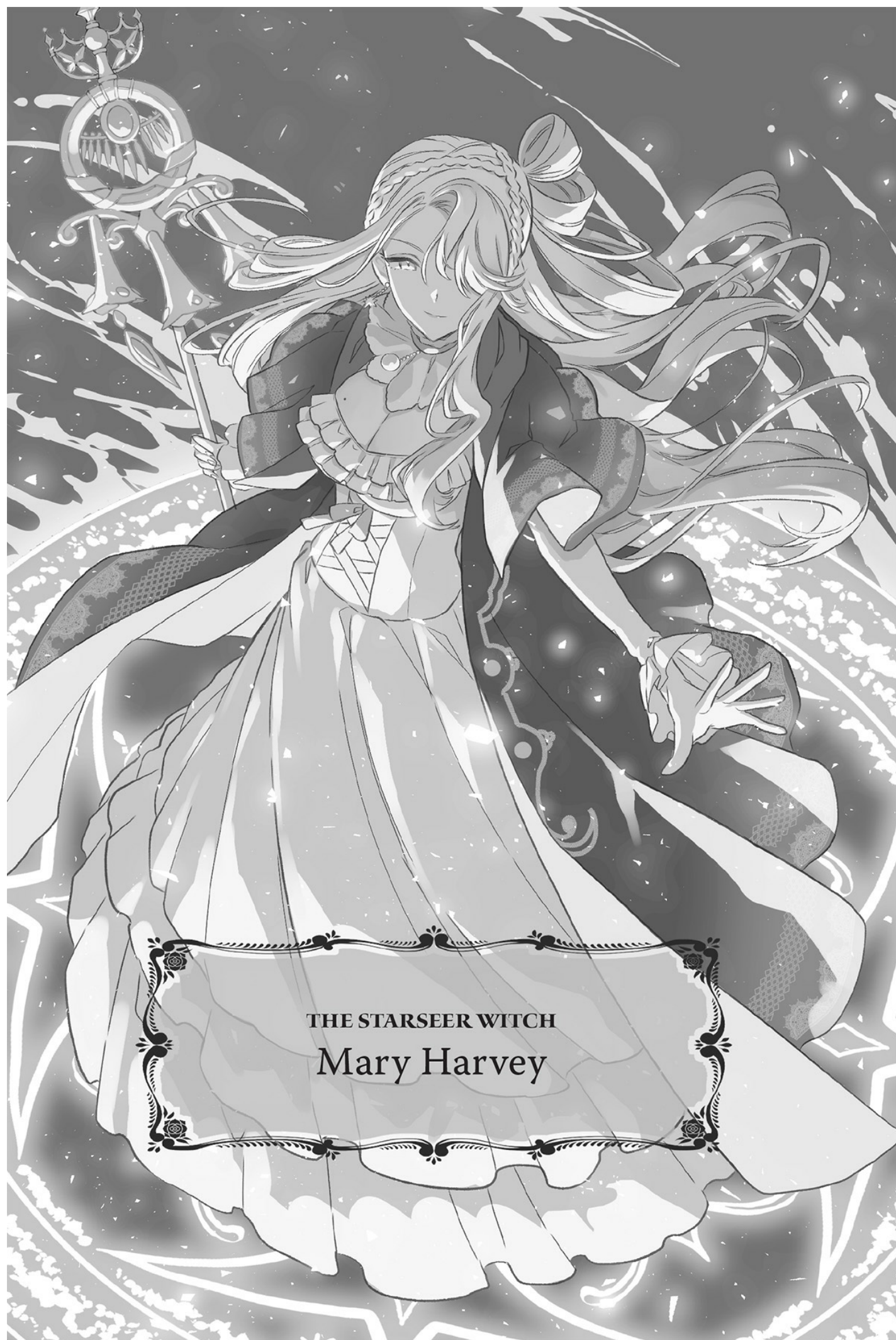
The stars told her that this night would be a major branching point for the kingdom.

Something shone brightly next to the bell tower. Starweaving Mira had finally begun to absorb mana.

Mary picked up the staff she’d set against the wall, looked out into the night, and chanted. It was an airy, songlike chant, and as she continued, a silvery light began to emanate from the staff.

Fine particles of light, like silver grains of sand, danced upward, seeming to meld into the night sky as they covered the air around Corlapton.

This was illusion magic. She’d re-created the town’s skyscape to keep Monica and the out-of-control Starweaving Mira from being seen.



THE STARSEER WITCH
Mary Harvey

The Starseer Witch gazed at the stars every night, so her illusion was perfect, blocking all view of what was happening above.

She jingled the adornments on her staff as a thin smile formed on her lips.

“It’s time to see what you’re made of, Monica Everett—Silent Witch.”

* * *

Monica’s body, thrown into the air by her flight spell, hurtled upward at more of an angle than she’d intended. Her current course was going to send her in a completely different direction from Starweaving Mira.

“Wah... Wah, wah! Wah!”

She flailed her arms and legs like someone drowning in a river, trying to correct her course, only to lose her balance and plunge straight toward the bell tower.

“Eeeeeee?!”

By flapping her legs in midair and twisting, she just barely managed to avoid a head-on collision, instead zooming past the tower.

Monica’s throat squeezed out more frightened whimpers as she tried to follow Bartholomeus and Starweaving Mira. But her body, still tilted to one side, wouldn’t move in the direction she wanted it to.

This is scary—no, terrifying! Balance! I need to get my balance... Balance... What does balance mean agaaain?!

Glenn’s mastery of flight magecraft allowed him to slip and glide freely through the air no matter his posture, but Monica couldn’t even maintain an upright position.

To put it simply, she was dog-paddling. She was tipped forward slightly, flapping her arms and legs, looking for all the world like she was being carried away by a river.

As she flailed in midair, Bartholomeus grew smaller and smaller in the distance. They were getting away.

Balance, balance, how do I get my balaaance...?

Monica looked back over her short life, trying to recall any memory she might have about regaining one's balance.

She had lots of knowledge to draw on regarding magecraft and mathematics, but when it came to how to handle herself physically, she knew embarrassingly little.

What needs balance...? Oh, right! Horseback riding!

She fought her way to the top of the ash-wood staff in her hands and straddled it. When she did, she could envision a little more easily the posture she had when riding a horse.

Leaning forward makes me more prone to falling. Leaning backward makes it harder to balance. I need to concentrate on staying upright at all times...

Keeping in mind what Felix had taught her in riding class and correcting her posture, Monica was able to stop shaking so much from side to side. She had to work hard to maintain her concentration, but she was now traveling at a decent speed compared to her earlier dog-paddling.

Her position straddling the staff had her constantly bouncing. Was this what it felt like to ride a horse running at full speed?

When your horse is running, you use a binary system... One, two, one, two. Sit, stand, sit, stand. That way, you avoid the shaking, and it's easier to balance...

That was the technique Felix had taught her for trotting. She couldn't do the exact same thing on her staff for lack of stirrups, but she concentrated on moving up and down anyway.

At first, she was just clumsily shaking herself, but as she continued, timing her movements to the shaking, she thought she could feel her balance improve somewhat. As long as she didn't have to turn, this might work out after all.

Once her flying had stabilized a little, the distance between her and Bartholomeus began to shrink.

"Silent Witch."

"Hya-wah?!" Monica cried in surprise at the sudden voice in her ears. It was Ryn, most likely directly vibrating her eardrums to speak to her.

“Congratulations on learning flight magecraft.”

To be honest, Monica didn't feel like this qualified as having “learned” it at all. She felt like a baby deer just starting to walk but even more precarious. As Monica worked, breath ragged, to maintain her balance, Ryn continued.

“A wide-area illusion has been constructed in the skies above Corlaption. I believe it to be the Starseer Witch's doing. I am maintaining the soundproof barrier as well, so you will not need to worry about the townspeople witnessing you.”

“Th-thank y-hoowooohaaahhh?!”

Before she could finish, Starweaving Mira flickered eerily, then fired ten golden, glowing arrows of light at her.

Monica immediately put up a defensive barrier to block them. The barrier stopped the hail of arrows, then shattered. A moment later, more of them flew at her. Her miserable flight skills meant she couldn't dodge them—all she could do was continue to guard herself using barriers.

She tried narrowing the size of the barrier in order to increase its strength, but once again, it simply shattered. Monica shuddered to imagine Starweaving Mira's offensive capabilities. It could fire fast, and it could fire hard.

Monica was capable of maintaining two separate spells at once, but now that she was using flight magecraft, she could only cast one. It wouldn't be enough.

“You wretched, hateful, detestable thing, interrupting our elopement like this... This time, I will shoot you out of the sky for sure.”

Starweaving Mira shone much more brightly than before, then sent another volley of light arrows at Monica. This time, they spread out into a dome shape to cover her from every angle.

Surrounded by the magic item's attack, Monica told herself, *These are all numbers. The light arrows, myself, everything—the whole world is made out of numbers.*

Her mind sank into the world of numbers, and she banished all her emotions, converting the arrows around her into digits.

First, she calculated their firing speed. Her awkward flight magecraft wouldn't allow her to avoid them.

Next, she calculated the strength of her barrier. If she used it to cover herself from all angles, it wouldn't stand up to the attack, but if she made it the size of a shield, she could manage to block several shots.

Finally, she calculated the arrows' trajectories. They didn't have homing capabilities, so that one was easy.

All right, then...

The shower of arrows fell toward her. And just as it did, she *disengaged her flight spell*.

By falling, only the arrows above her would still be on course to hit their mark—which meant she could focus her defenses overhead.

And by disengaging the flight spell, she could create *two* barriers.

When the first broke, she would use the second to defend as she created a third. Rotating sets of two shields like this, she perfectly protected herself from all the arrows.

It was an insane scheme no ordinary mage could've pulled off—only Monica, with her uncharmed magecraft, could have managed it.

After warding off the volley of arrows, she recast her flight spell, again without chanting.

She'd been counting as the attacks hit. *It should take at least 3.5 seconds for Starweaving Mira to fire more.*

Monica accelerated to full speed. She abandoned any ideas of evasion or defense and simply flew toward her target as fast as she could.

"Stay away! Stay away! Stay! Away!"

"There are...a whole lot of people...who want to see your magical dedication!" cried Monica, still straddling her staff as she grabbed on to Bartholomeus's right arm.

"No! No! I want to be wed to my beloved. I want to be with him forever, in the

care of the goddess of the underworld...”

Monica’s words probably wouldn’t reach Starweaving Mira—not as fixedly obsessed as it was. But there was something she had to say.

“I want...to make this festival a success!”

Ringling the bells and mourning the dead would be like a healing salve for so many people—Monica included. Starweaving Mira was being selfish, so Monica had decided to be selfish right back.

And then her fingers touched the starred ruby. She constructed a magic formula without chanting, forming a swarm of countless butterflies, all shining white, dancing through the night sky. As their glittering scales scattered around them, they began to attach themselves, one after another, to Starweaving Mira.

Then Starweaving Mira dreamed.

She stood in a beautiful field of flowers. She was no longer a piece of jewelry but an ordinary young girl.

Ahhh. She sighed, using her legs to walk through the field.

Flower petals danced into the air. Standing just beyond them, holding out his hand, was her beloved.

His face was backlit, not visible to her, but that didn’t matter.

“Oh, oh, how I’ve missed you. From now on, I will always, always be at your side, my beloved...”

Together forever with the one she loved most—that was the perfectly ordinary, happy dream that Starweaving Mira had always wished for.

Once she saw that Starweaving Mira had fallen completely silent, Monica heaved a sigh of relief.



“It...it worked...!”

Monica had used a mental interference spell to show the item a dream.

Spells interfering with the mind were meant to be used on humans—nobody had ever tried using one on an ancient magic item before. But Starweaving Mira possessed such a powerful ego that it was very much like a human.

Monica’s idea had been this: If it had the same sort of mind as a human, wouldn’t magecraft that interfered with the human mind affect it as well?

Ultimately, she had been right, and Starweaving Mira had gone quiet. That much, at least, went according to Monica’s plan.

But a moment later, Bartholomeus’s body, which had been floating until now, grew suddenly heavy, as though it had just remembered the concept of gravity.

Panicking, Monica tried to maintain her flight spell. Unfortunately, she wasn’t practiced enough to support his large frame.

She tried to use wind magecraft to support both their weights as she maintained the flight spell, but she didn’t have much mana left. Flight spells really gobbled it up.

The moment she used a wind spell, her reserves would run dry.

“Eek?! Wah, oowah, hyaaaaahhhhh!”

As a result, the two of them got tangled up and began to plummet. Beneath them were the bustling festival streets. If they fell here, it would be a horrible tragedy.

Oh no. I can't ruin the festival like this—not after I managed to get Starweaving Mira back!

Just as her vision began to grow black with despair, a gentle, soft wind materialized below, catching them. Then they were pulled, bobbing through the air, before being slowly brought down to a spot near the middle of town—a deserted alley.

Deserted except for one “person”—a maid with an owl on her head. Before them stood the high wind spirit Rynzbelfeid.

“Miss Ryn!”

Ryn had used her power over wind to save them from certain death.

Monica tried to get out a few words of thanks, but just then, Ryn’s beautiful face clouded over.

“I find myself with many regrets,” she said.

“...Huh?”

“I believe this would have been the ideal situation for me to princess-carry you, Silent Witch.”

Monica found that a rather ridiculous regret to have.

The owl hooted peacefully atop Ryn’s head as the spirit continued. “The princess carry is said to have its origins in a certain royal family’s wedding tradition, in which the betrothed would carry the princess in a sideways position across his arms to the wedding venue. It is an esteemed and honored tradition, and I have gathered it is a standard way of transporting humans. I’ve also heard that when one performs this ‘princess carry’ on another, it makes the carried’s heart ‘flutter.’”

Monica had been a human for seventeen years, and yet much of this was news to her.

“I had wished to princess-carry you, Silent Witch, and ask you if your heart ‘fluttered,’ as they say... What a shame.”

“Ummm... Errr...”

As Monica tried to think of a response, Ryn quickly walked up to her. The spirit’s face was just as impassive as always, but it exuded an unusual intensity.

“May I have a redo?”

A redo? thought Monica. *Is she asking me to go back up and fall again?* She *really* didn’t want to go through all that a second time, so she hastily changed the topic. “Um, more importantly, is the prince all right?”

“Yes. If you go out onto the main road, he’ll be right there. He seemed to be searching for you.”

A significant amount of time had passed since she’d parted ways with Felix. He was probably worried sick.

Monica pointed her right index finger at Bartholomeus—who lay asleep on the ground at her feet—and quickly explained, “That’s Starweaving Mira. Um, I put a mental interference spell on it to get it to behave... It should end in twenty minutes.”

Mental interference spells were semi-forbidden—permitted for use only under very specific conditions. This was clearly making Monica uneasy.

Ryn answered plainly. “The Starseer Witch strikes me as the considerate, flexible sort. I am sure she will overlook your usage of mental interference magecraft, given the situation’s urgency. I will hand this burglar over to her as well.”

When she heard the word *burglar*, Monica’s eyebrows drooped, and she started playing with her fingers. “Um, he said he was just a victim who got possessed by it...”

She couldn’t tell if Ryn heard her or not. The spirit hefted Bartholomeus’s body across her arms horizontally—holding him in a princess carry. She must have really wanted to try it out.

“I will be going now,” she said. “I’ll be waiting in the ceremony venue, so

when you wish to return, you need only call.”

Ryn gave a slight bow, then launched into the sky, holding Bartholomeus in her arms like a princess and with the owl still on her head.

Monica watched for a few moments as they left, then quickly turned and exited onto the main street. She found Felix right away. He seemed to notice her immediately, too. He pushed through the crowd and ran over to her.

“Monica! Thank goodness.”

He was a little out of breath—he’d really hurried to get over to her. Feeling pangs of guilt, Monica stammered, “U-ummm, I’m really sorry. Something, uh, suddenly came up, so...”

“Something came up? ...I see. You *do* look like you were rushing around.”

Felix leaned over a bit and fixed Monica’s bangs. They were all over the place thanks to her soaring across the sky with that flight spell.

Even Monica could tell he was trying to figure out what she’d been up to. He wasn’t trying to hide it; he knew Monica was weak to silent pressure.

As she trembled and tried to think of an excuse, Felix removed the mask covering the upper half of his face.

“Or...,” he said, his eyebrows drooping and his usual gentle smile taking on a lonely cast. “Did you just not like being with me?”

He sounded hurt.

Ever since they’d run into each other, Felix had been doing everything he could to help Monica enjoy herself. When he’d realized she was afraid of people, he’d told her to think of him as a ghost and stayed with her.

And yet Monica had never even bothered to thank him—instead, she’d disappeared without warning.

Her face paled. *I’m the worst*, she thought. Bernie’s expression of disgust flashed in her mind. “*You’re a dishonest cheat. You only ever think of yourself—you don’t care one bit about anyone else or what happens to them, do you?*”

He’s right, she thought.

Monica had always hated being scared, hated being hurt. All she ever thought about was running away and hiding. In doing so, she'd spurned all the goodwill others had shown her.

And the person standing in front of her had been reaching out to her ever since they'd first met.

If she said she was sorry, Felix would probably smile and tell her not to worry about it. He'd treat her the same as always... *But...*, she thought, gripping her ash-wood staff and looking up.

Still smiling sadly, Felix joked, "I'm a ghost—I don't exist. If you're scared, you can run away, little squirrel. When a living person spurns a ghost, the ghost disappears."

"U-um!" she cried out in an unusually loud voice.

That seemed to genuinely take Felix by surprise.

Monica felt herself begin to hunch and straightened her back before looking up at Felix.

She was embarrassed. She was scared. She didn't know what she'd do if he gave her a strange look. But she pushed all those fears and anxieties aside to squeeze out just a few more words.

"Right now, I'm a ghost!" she said. "I don't exist. I'm just a ghost named Monica, so...!"

She wasn't the Silent Witch Monica Everett or the student council accountant Monica Norton. She was just a girl named Monica right now, without any title to speak of—and it was as simply Monica that she reached a trembling hand out to him.

"Let's enjoy the rest of the night as ghosts together, I-Ike!"

The prince's eyes widened a little. He blinked slowly, his long golden eyelashes moving down and then up, his blue eyes shining like starry gemstones.

He grasped her hand, then gave it a light pull. When Monica put her foot down to stop herself from tipping over, her hood came off.

Felix brought his lips to her now-exposed ear and whispered, "Thank you."

The corners of his eyes had turned down, and he was smiling. Not that radiant, princely smile he usually wore but the unaffected smile of a regular young man enjoying the festival.



CHAPTER 11

A Book's Worth

Felix brought Monica into a narrower street branching off the main road. Decorative lanterns were practically everywhere in town, so they hadn't needed any light before, but that didn't apply to the backstreets. Once they'd gotten away from the roar of the festival, Felix removed his mask, then took a personal lantern from his belt and lit it.

"It's a little farther down this road," he said. "It's dark, so watch your step."

"Um, where are we going, Ike?"

"It's a shop that doesn't have anything to do with the Bell-Ringing Festival but one I enjoy nonetheless. And I think you will, too."

Felix gave her a mischievous wink. His voice was full of excitement, and his steps were light as he walked through the night.

Monica followed after him, hesitating in the dark, unfamiliar lane. "You're really good at enjoying the nightlife, Ike."

"Mm. I've probably tried every kind of popular entertainment the kingdom has to offer by now."

"Oh, I see," replied Monica very seriously. "You're a professional at this."

Society at large had less attractive names for such a person. Felix responded with a hearty laugh. The lantern in his hand jittered as he shook.

"A friend of mine once told me something," he explained, stopping to look up at the sky.

Monica followed suit. The twinkling of the stars above seemed fainter than usual, probably because the entire town was lit up.

That pale twinkling reflecting in his eyes, Felix continued. "'I want you to find something that excites you—for your own enjoyment and nobody else's. I want you to find all kinds of things that interest and entertain you.' Ever since then, I've been searching for it—something that really excites me."

Monica lowered her gaze from the sky and looked at the prince. His expression revealed an emptiness and a resigned sort of sadness. She had seen all sorts of new looks on him that day. His genuine smile as he enjoyed the festival and this hollow expression, like he'd already given up on what he claimed to be searching for.

It all seemed incongruous, and it troubled her. *What sort of things would he even find "fun"?*

The second prince was a genius at everything he did, blessed with charisma, looks, and talent in every field you could think of. But she doubted any of it really excited him.

He'd tried every form of entertainment people generally sought out, gone through the motions, and pretended he was having a good time...all the while sighing and thinking to himself, *This isn't it.*

And yet he was still looking—all to fulfill his friend's request.

"If I become king one day, I'll lose all my free time. If that happens, I won't be able to fool around like this anymore. Essentially, this time—the time I can spend as a ghost—is like the remainder of my life as myself."

"You want to be king...even though you'll lose your freedom?"

"Want to? I don't want to become king."

Felix shook his head slowly and looked down at Monica. All expression had vanished from his attractive features, and his sapphire-blue eyes had lost their luster.

"I *have* to become king."

That's right, thought Monica. *Being born into royalty means you have to aim for the throne.* That was probably a feeling she'd never understand.

Topics regarding royal succession were extremely delicate. If she asked something in the wrong way, it could be taken as an insult to Felix's fitness to rule.

Monica bowed deeply. "Ummm, I'm really sorry for asking something so rude."

“No, I don’t mind. I’m just happy you were interested in me enough to ask. You’ve seemed shockingly uninterested in me in the past, after all.”

As Monica faltered, Felix turned his gaze ahead and added some brightness to his voice. “Oh, look! We’re almost there.”

Near the far end of the small street was an old brick house. A small lamp and a wooden placard hung from the door; the lamp’s orange glow illuminated the words on the placard.

The simple, unadorned sign read PORTER USED BOOKS in rough letters.

“Monica, this isn’t something I tell everyone, but this shop is my favorite of them all. There’s something inside that truly excites me,” he said in a singsong voice, opening the door.

Within, bookshelves were lined up at regular intervals. The aisles between them were narrow, just barely enough for one person to squeeze past another.

Without any hesitation, Felix strode over to the aisle between the second and third shelves from the right. Monica let down her hood and followed him.

The shop was filled with the scent of old books and bug-repelling herbs. She glanced at the books here and there; they were all packed in tightly and included academic volumes on herbology, medicine, and the like.

After passing through the aisle, they came to a small counter, where a man sat writing something by lamplight. He wore glasses and had tan skin and frizzy black hair. His eyes were almond-shaped, and his features were very pronounced—he must have been from another country. She couldn’t really tell his age. He looked both twenty and forty simultaneously.

The planks in the old shop creaked under their feet, so he must have noticed them enter, but he never lifted his face from the pages.

“Hey, good evening, Porter.”

The man still didn’t look up, even when Felix spoke to him. But neither did he look so absorbed in his work that he wouldn’t have heard. After a moment, he stopped writing, dipped his feather pen in an inkwell, and said simply, “...Hello,” before resuming his writing. Whatever he was working on, it didn’t look like

accounts—he was using lined composition paper.

At any rate, he didn't bother to change his curt attitude, despite Felix's friendliness. The man was clearly an eccentric.

"Monica, this is Porter," explained Felix. "He's both the shop's owner and a novelist. For about half the year, he's running all over the place stocking up on books. We're fortunate to have run into him today."

"Indeed," said Porter. "Just got back from a trip the other day. Found a few books you'd probably enjoy."

"Really?!" exclaimed Felix, his face lighting up.

Porter used his pen to point to a bookshelf near the wall. Apparently, that was where the books Felix would enjoy were located.

Felix plucked something from the shelf the man had indicated. "Oh!" he cried. "An old issue of *Minerva Springs*!"

Monica's eyes went wide when she saw the magazine he'd picked up.

Minerva's Mage Training Institution published a magazine twice a year compiling the results of their students' and teachers' research, and that periodical was called *Minerva Springs*. Naturally, as Monica had been an honors student there, several issues had featured her own theses.

Why would he want Minerva Springs?! she wondered. Eighty percent of those magazines were just about magecraft. The other 20 percent generally comprised essays from professors about their hobbies and tips to make life as a student more comfortable.

Maybe he's a big fan of those essays where the professors talk about hair restoration... That had to be it—there was no other option. Either that or he was looking for tips on student life.

As Monica tried to convince herself of this, Felix flipped through the pages of the magazine, eyes sparkling like he was a little kid.

"This has one of the Silent Witch's essays!"

Monica gasped and stifled a shriek. *Did he just say "the Silent Witch"? I must have misheard... Yeah, I misheard...*

As she paled, Porter stopped writing for a moment and remarked, “The three issues there all include an essay from the Silent Witch. And the newest issue has a fairly recent contribution.”

“Porter! You do such an excellent job!”

Felix sounded overjoyed. Indeed, he seemed positively jubilant. Monica had never seen his eyes light up like this. This was too many surprises at once for Monica, and it left her in a daze.

The prince laughed a little bashfully. “Surprised?” he asked. “I’m actually quite interested in magecraft.”

“Um, but didn’t you say you weren’t taking fundamental magecraft...?”

“There’s a good reason for that. I’m forbidden from studying anything related to the subject.”

Monica was surprised. Many members of Ridill’s royal family excelled at magecraft, and several talented mages had been part of their line. The current king was himself a user of earth magecraft, and Felix’s older brother—the first prince—had graduated from Minerva’s. She couldn’t imagine why they’d forbid Felix from studying it.

As Monica mulled this over, Felix continued to speak as he flipped through the pages, his enthusiasm obvious.

“Grimoires are mostly huge and expensive, right? And you need special permission to purchase or even view some of them. It’s such a pain to secretly acquire and store them in my room.”

On the other hand, *Minerva Springs* was comparatively easy to obtain, so the prince had opted for those instead. However, the essays that made it into the magazine were very carefully selected. In order to understand them, you would need at least intermediate knowledge of magecraft. *How much does Felix know?* she wondered.

Still perusing the magazine, Felix continued at length. “The last essay I read by the Silent Witch was incredible. It had to do with the positional coordinates of wide-area spells. I couldn’t *believe* she’d written it when she was just a student. To summarize, rather than adding a tracking formula to a wide-area spell, she

proposes triggering the formula directly in front of the targets, increasing the spell's accuracy and precision—but the way she calculates the positional coordinates is simply revolutionary, allowing her to considerably abbreviate the formula itself...”

Monica nodded along, grimacing. *Yes, she thought. Yes, that's right... Modern tracking formulae have too many flaws, so rather than waiting for them to improve, I wanted to try creating a wide-area spell with a high degree of accuracy that didn't rely on them... Oh nooo, he understood everything perfectlyyyy!*

As she stood there trembling, Felix looked at her and added, slightly embarrassed, “I’m sorry. I’m actually a huge fan of the Silent Witch. Once I get started talking about her, I go on and on.”

“A-a fan...?”

“Yeah. The Silent Witch has made an unmistakably significant contribution to the field of magecraft in our kingdom. And her unchanted spells...they’re so beautiful.” He looked completely enraptured as he said the last part.

But Monica couldn’t pay attention to that right now. *He saw me using unchanted magecraft?! Oh no, when did that happen?! I haven't been exposed... have I? Please say I haven't! Oh nooo!*

“I’d never seen such beautiful magecraft before in my life. Ahhh, I do so wish I could see it in person just one more time.” He sighed sadly.

“At the moment,” chimed in Porter, “I’m in the middle of writing a scene in my new novel about a foolish man who falls in love with a theater actress. Abram, the main character’s friend, is head over heels for the actress Catherine, and at every opportunity, he says, ‘I want to see her perform in person just one more time.’ You sound exactly like him right now.”

“Ahhh, Porter, you may be right. Yes, this must be what they call first love.”

F-first love...? Monica’s whole body began to twitch. She was so overwhelmed, the link between her brain and facial muscles was malfunctioning. *What should I do? I’d kind of like to pay a visit to the world of numbers.*

“Surprised?” asked the prince. “This is what excites me at the moment.”

“U-um, have you ever, well, met the Silent Witch?” she asked, her face pale.

Felix nodded, entranced, his cheeks flushing a rosy red. Then he whispered to Monica so that Porter couldn’t hear. “At her inauguration and at the New Year’s ceremony. But she always wears a hood, so almost nobody has seen what she looks like. And she doesn’t join the post-ceremony parties, so I’ve never talked to her or seen her face.”

Thank goodness, thought Monica. *My identity is safe, at least.* She sighed in relief.

Her relief, however, was premature.

“But once I become king, it’ll be no problem—I’ll be able to meet her whenever I wish. The Seven Sages are like advisers to the king, after all.”

That was a *huge* problem for Monica.

“Once I’m king, I’ll be able to speak with her directly... Maybe she’ll even let me see her face.”

Please, no, I’m not good enough to be an adviser to His Majesty! In fact, I want to apologize right now for disappointing you in the future!

Ultimately, Monica looked down at her feet and clutched her stomach. For starters, she swore she’d keep her ceremonial appearances to an absolute minimum and never, ever remove her hood.

“By the way, are you interested in used bookstores at all, Monica?”

“Oh, um, yes...”

Felix’s comments had given her a bit of a stomachache, but used bookstores still made her heart dance. And here, they had all sorts of books—from relatively recent publications to rare antiques from before the development of printing or bookbinding.

A quick look around revealed about half the shelves were filled with fictional novels for the masses, while the other half held more practical books and academic tomes. There were even a few rare books that had gone out of print.

“May I, um, take a look at the books as well?”

“Of course! That’s why I brought you here,” Felix said, nodding before going back to fishing through the issues of *Minerva Springs*. He must have been really looking forward to this.

Monica couldn’t read anything related to magecraft in Felix’s presence, so she decided to check the shelves for books on mathematics instead. The shelf right in front of them had a bunch of volumes on medicine and biology. But then, alongside them, she spotted a familiar name and gasped.

Discerning Magical Disposition from Inherited Traits by Venedict Reyn.

The book had been published five years prior—and after its author was executed for his research into forbidden magecraft, they’d been collected and burned.

Monica’s hand was drawn to it. She took it and—shaking—turned to the first page. The very first sentence was one she’d heard many a time.

The world is filled with numbers.

The contents were difficult to understand without knowledge of both biology and magecraft, and because Monica hadn’t focused on biology in school, she could understand only around half of it.

But she still remembered the numbers in the tables and graphs.

This... This is my father’s book...!

It was proof that her father—executed as a heretic for breaking a magecraft taboo—had lived. She recalled those burning books—their pages shredded and reduced to ash.

And now, those numbers she’d burned into her memory in an attempt to preserve at least *something* were right before her eyes, complete.

Monica clutched the book to her chest and ran over to Porter. “Excuse me! Could I... I’d like this book! Um, please!”

Porter looked up from his composition paper and stared at her. When he saw the title of the book, his eyes widened slightly behind the frames of his glasses. “A friend of mine left that book when he passed. I’ve no intention of selling it

cheaply.”

Monica was shocked to learn this Porter fellow had been a friend of her late father’s. But she couldn’t discuss her father now—not in front of Felix.

Suppressing her astonishment, she leaned forward a little and asked, “How much?”

Porter held up two fingers. Technical books like these generally cost around one silver coin. She’d assumed he was asking for two silver coins, but...

“Two gold coins.”

Monica was speechless. Two gold coins was enough money to support a commoner living humbly for quite a while.

As one of the Seven Sages, she had enough saved away to build a house in the royal capital. But she so seldom had opportunities to go shopping that she never carried around money like that.

“Um, I promise I’ll pay for it at some point... Would you be able to put it aside?”

“How many years do you think it’d take a kid like you to save up two gold coins?”

“Oof...”

She was perfectly capable of paying the two gold coins. But if she said that now, it would reveal who she actually was.

As she was desperately racking her brain over how to ask the man to set it aside for her, Felix, suddenly next to her at the counter, put down two gold coins.

“That should solve the problem, right?”

Monica’s eyes flew open. She looked up at Felix. “No! No, you can’t! I can’t possibly ask you to pay that much money for—”

“Think of it as hush money for keeping quiet about this little excursion of mine,” said Felix, tilting his head to the side and grinning. “Accessories don’t make you happy, but this will, right?”

“W-well, but two whole gold coins?!”

“I don’t know how much that book is worth on the market, but to you, it’s worth at least that much, isn’t it?”

The moment she heard those words, tears began to fall from Monica’s eyes.

Everyone had ridiculed her father’s research—those burning books—as worthless. They’d ripped them, torn them, and tossed them into the flames. It didn’t matter how much Monica insisted they were worth. Nobody listened. In fact, her uncle had beaten her for it—he didn’t even want her trying to tell people.

Don’t say anything that’ll get us into trouble. Over and over. Relentlessly.

Felix couldn’t have known this book’s worth. But he’d recognized that Monica cared for it a great deal, and he’d accepted that. She was so happy. Tears continued to stream down her cheeks as she nodded again and again.

The prince leaned over a little and wiped her flowing tears with his finger. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Monica sniffled, then managed to twist her face into an awkward smile. “Thank...thank you, Ike.”

Felix narrowed his eyes, returning her smile.

Sparing them only a glance, Porter picked up the payment. “That’s two gold coins. The book is yours.”

He held the book out to Monica—her father’s book, now worth two gold coins.

Monica wiped her tears on her sleeve and took the book, hands shaking. And then, clutching it to her breast, she bowed deeply to Porter and Felix both. “Thank you... Thank you for giving this book so much worth.”

“If someone overcharges you, shouldn’t you get mad and call them a swindler or something?” murmured Porter, appalled.

But Monica shook her head. Her father had never shown interest in how other people appraised or valued his work, but she was far, far happier this way than if his book had been sold cheaply.

As she stood there, hugging the book to her chest, nose red from crying and a happy smile on her face, Felix watched over her with a kind gaze—like he was reminiscing on bygone days or recalling an irreplaceable memory.

When they left Porter Used Books, they found the mood in town had changed. The roar of the festival they'd been hearing from the main road earlier had completely died down.

"The magical dedication must be starting," said Felix just as the bell tower began to ring. The sound of the large bell blended with the soft jingling of the smaller bells decorating the town's streets.

Monica sensed the flow of mana around her begin to change. She looked down and saw golden droplets of light drifting up from the ground, floating into the air. The smaller ones would stick together, steadily growing larger as they ascended soundlessly into the sky.

The Starseer Witch is using Starweaving Mira to absorb mana from the land...

The drops of light rose from all across town before drifting toward the church, as though of their own volition. When they eventually reached their destination, they spread out into the air overhead like smoke from a chimney. The accumulated mana in the land was being returned to the sky.

Originally, the Bell-Ringing Festival was a harvest festival for giving thanks to the King of the Earth Spirits. But through the legend of the underworld watchman sneaking out to make merry...it had shifted into a festival for mourning the souls of the dead.

There were several spells used for magical dedications like these, but Monica felt she understood why magicule release had been the method chosen for the festival.

The night skies were the realm of the Goddess of Darkness, who ruled over the underworld. The sight of all these golden droplets climbing up to the stars evoked the image of the souls of the dead returning to the underworld. And wasn't that why everyone was ringing their bells?

Monica joined them, ringing the bell affixed to the staff in her right hand, hugging her father's book tightly in her left, and shutting her eyes.

On this festival night where the dead came to visit, she had, indeed, met her late father.

Dad..., she thought. Someday, I'll be able to tell you proudly that I've done my best.

And when Monica passed through the underworld's gates herself one day, she hoped he'd stroke her hair, just like he always had.

...I'll try my hardest.

Beside her as she prayed for her departed father, Felix said softly, "They look like stars."

He gazed without blinking at the radiant lights rising into the night sky. Was he, too, thinking of someone he'd never meet again?

"Ike, do you want to ring the bell, too?" asked Monica, her voice subdued.

Felix looked blankly at the bell gently swinging from the tip of her staff and gave a single nod. After a short word of thanks, he took the staff from her and rang the bell.

Between its jingles, Monica heard him speaking—to himself, perhaps.

"I've always wanted to tell my friend this."

He didn't offer any silent prayers. Instead, he looked up at the lights dancing among the stars.

"I promise I'll make your wish come true."

Monica suspected his friend was no longer of this world, and so she thought it best not to pry.

If he was able to ring a bell and mourn, then all her efforts to protect the festival had been worth it.



* * *

When the two of them returned to Madam Cassandra's, a big feast was being held on the first floor. Monica didn't know what this shop was usually like, but it was probably even livelier right now on account of the festival.

Felix gestured for Monica to follow, then led her up to a private room near the back of the second floor and opened the door. The room itself was much larger than Monica had imagined. It must have been made for hosting nobility. It seemed they maintained the room so that it would be ready whenever the customer returned—a whole pile of fruit sat on a dish atop a low table, and both the furnace and candles were already lit.

"Um, Ike. I...w-well..." Monica stammered, fidgeting as she looked up at the prince. She'd been holding this in for a long time now.

Felix smiled softly and nodded, seeming to understand exactly how she felt. "I know. I'm actually thinking the same thing."

Their cheeks were slightly red, having left the cold for the warmth of the room. They gazed into each other's eyes.

Then they held up the books in their hands. Monica held the volume her father had written, and Felix the issues of *Minerva Springs*.

"Um! Can I read this, please?"

"Of course. I can't wait to open mine, either."

No words were necessary after that. They joyously flopped down on the sofa and opened their books.

The moment you first open a new book is a special treat. Particularly if it's a book you'd really, really wanted.

Even for a Sage, the contents of Monica's father's book were very difficult. Nevertheless, she was overjoyed she could now understand the equations and magic formulae that had gone over her head as a child. Absorbed, she flipped through page after page.

The only sounds in the room were the crackling of the wood in the furnace and the turning of pages.

Eventually, they heard a light rap on the door, and it opened.

“Here, sir! I brought you some snacks and wine.”

Into the room came Doris, one of the shop’s prostitutes, her cherry-blond hair swaying as she moved. She held a basket full of snacks and wine in one hand. Unfortunately, both Monica and Felix were so absorbed in reading that neither of them looked up at her.

Doris glanced between the two of them, appalled, and exclaimed, “Hey, hey! A man and woman together this late at night, and you’re having a reading party?! Surely healthy young people have better things to do!”

Felix finally looked up at her. “Oh, Doris. Drinks? You can leave them over there. I’m just getting to the good part,” he said before lowering his gaze back to his magazine.

Doris set the basket on the low table, then tried pressing Monica instead. “Miss! Are you going to let him treat you like this?! He’s basically saying you’re hopelessly unattractive!”

Monica heard the words but didn’t actually think about them before speaking out of reflex. “Yes! Inherited traits have usually been thought of as the result of two natures mixing together like fluids, but this book proposes the idea of tiny grains called hereditary particles. These particles are like the blueprints for a person, determining their mana capacity and what elements they—”

“All right, enough with the completely unalluring discussion!” Doris took a drink from her basket and poured it into a glass, then pushed it at Monica. Was it warm fruit juice? Round slices of citrus fruit floated on its surface, and it had a sweet, honey-like scent.

“Drink this!” commanded Doris.

“Oh. Okay.”

Suddenly realizing her throat was parched, Monica gulped it down. The liquid had been cooled to a perfect drinking temperature.

And that was the point at which her mind essentially shut off.

“Here—you too, sir!”

Felix moved only his eyes to glance at the glass she was holding out to him. It contained warmed white wine with citrus slices and honey. He accepted the drink, took a single small sip, and narrowed his eyes. “Mm. A little wine while I read isn’t such a bad idea.”

“That’s not what the wine is for!” yelled Doris.

Monica closed her book and stood up without a word. Her eyes looked somehow muddled, unfocused.

“What’s wrong, Monica?” asked Felix.

Monica’s lips moved as she muttered something incomprehensible before saying in a garbled voice, “...It’s hot.”

The next moment, Monica was taking off her clothes. It happened in a flash—Felix didn’t even have time to stop her.

And Monica’s odd behavior didn’t stop there—she wobbled unsteadily over to him, grasped one of his hands with both of hers, then turned it so it was facing upward. Squeezing it a few times, she murmured unhappily.

“No paw...”

“What?”

Monica took his palm and stuck it to her cheek. Her face was soft and heated from the alcohol, and it felt good as she pressed his hand against it, but he had no idea what she wanted.

As he stood there bewildered, Monica’s eyelids drooped sadly. “No paaaaw...”

She started to sniffle, then managed to guide herself into the bed. There she curled up in her underwear, like some kind of small animal.

“I want to be a cat...,” she muttered. And with that mysterious declaration, her breathing evened, and she fell fast asleep.

Doris looked at Felix and asked with a straight face, “Sir, have you adopted a cat?”

“Hmm,” said the prince. “I’ve never seen her do that before, either. I’m honestly baffled.”

“What was that about paws?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

As they looked toward the bed, Monica murmured in her sleep, a smile on her face.

“Looks like that’s it for tonight,” said Felix.

“You’re terrible, sir. And with such a good woman right in front of you.” Pouting, Doris began to clean up the table. She was sharp enough to realize Felix had no such intentions.

Right before exiting the room, Doris blew him a friendly kiss and winked. “I’ll be on the floor below. If you get lonely, you’re welcome anytime.”

With that, she took her leave. Felix appreciated the woman’s clarity and decisiveness.

He could hear soft rustling and light snoring from the bed, as well as a little bit of sleep talking. He listened in, wondering what sort of dream she was having, but all she murmured were numbers. Even in her dreams, they were all she thought about.

“Good night, Monica,” he whispered before putting out the candles.

* * *

For the first time in a while, he dreamed.

In an elegantly furnished room, a boy held a necklace in his palm as he muttered to himself.

Every once in a while, the boy would look over a page in an open grimoire to his side, then turn back to the necklace, reciting the chant written in the book with some difficulty.

“What are you doing, Lord Felix?”

Felix immediately looked up at the servant boy who had called his name.

“I heard this necklace my mother left behind has a high earth spirit in it,” he explained. “I thought that if I could make a pact with a spirit, too, Grandfather would be proud of me!”

The servant boy shook his head. “That’s not possible.”

“Huh?”

As his young master froze in confusion, the servant made a difficult expression, then explained. “In order to form a pact with a high spirit, your elemental specialty—determined at birth—needs to be the same as the spirit’s. Your specialty is different, so you can’t make a contract with that one.”

“Oh no...” Felix looked at the necklace in his hand with disappointment.

He had no talent for academics or athletics, and he had a poor constitution and frequently fell ill. What’s more, he was extremely shy, so he couldn’t speak very well in front of others, either. He was a weak young man—never able to meet his grandfather’s expectations.

“Why can’t I ever please Grandfather?” murmured Felix, tears welling in his eyes.

The servant boy gazed at his young master, then said quietly, “Please forgive me a moment’s indignity.”

“...Huh?”

The servant boy peeled back his jacket, revealing a book fastened to his body underneath.

“I want you to have this,” he said, holding it out to Felix.

When Felix saw the book’s title, his eyes lit up. It was about astronomy. He loved the stars in the night sky, but all the adults told him a prince had no need for such knowledge. If he had time to waste on such a subject, they said, he should spend it studying something more practical. And if any of them found him with a book on astronomy, they would confiscate it.

That was why the servant had needed to fasten such a thick book to his small body in order to sneak it in for Felix.

“But everyone says it’s pointless for me to have any books on astronomy...,” said Felix, his voice a mix of joy and unease.

He wanted nothing more than to read books about his favorite field, but nobody around him would permit it. He was already behind in his studies—and

that left him uneasy. Was it really okay for him to have this?

As he hung his head, his servant said gently, “But those books are important to you, aren’t they?”

At those words, tears began to stream down Felix’s face. Always quick to cry, the prince sniffled but still managed a scrunched smile. “He-he... Thanks. I’m really happy.”

The servant looked at his young master with kind eyes, as though he was watching over a younger brother.

That evening, Felix was called to his grandfather’s room. Inside, he stood, his face white.

Before the duke knelt the boy’s young servant. His upper body was naked, and his pale back was horribly swollen with whip marks from his punishment.

“Grandfather... Wh-why...?”

“Apparently, this *thing* has given you something unnecessary,” said the duke, his gaze moving to the book on the table.

It was the astronomy book Felix’s servant had brought for him. Felix had been hiding it in his room, but a different servant had found it.

Felix’s face went even paler. He lowered his head. “I-I’m sorry. B-but you’re wrong. It’s not his fault. I forced him to do it...”

“Then he obeyed your orders instead of mine? To think a mere servant would mistake his master.”

The duke brought the whip down on the servant’s back. The dry *pop* made Felix’s breath catch in his throat.

“Please stop!” he begged. “Please! Please, I won’t ask for any more astronomy books, I promise. Please...”

“Then throw that book into the furnace.”

Felix did as the duke commanded. He picked up the book from the table and brought it over to the furnace. Finally, with trembling hands, he tossed his precious tome into the fire.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry...,” he wept as he watched the pages burn away.

The duke snorted. “I heard you made a fool of yourself during your dance lessons today.”

“I-I’m sorr—”

Another *snap* as the whip came down again—not on Felix but on the back of the kneeling servant. The duke knew perfectly well that harming the servant would be more effective than harming the prince directly.

“This is all because you’re preoccupied with *astronomy*, of all things.”

“I-I’m really, really sorry! I’m really sorry... Next time... Next time I’ll do it right! I’ll never bring shame upon you again, I promise. So...”

The duke whipped the boy’s back a final time, then said lowly, “You will not have another chance.”

“...Yes, sir.” Felix nodded, shaking all over.

The duke looked at him, gaze colder than a winter lake. “How deplorable that Aileen’s son turned out to be a miserable failure like you.”

* * *

It’s been a while since I’ve dreamed about that, thought Felix, awake now and composed.

It was still dark beyond the curtains. Not much time had passed since he’d gotten into bed.

Suddenly, something near his stomach squirmed. It was Monica.

His dream had probably been the result of seeing her expression in the used bookstore. She had hugged the book to her chest, her face scrunched up as she cried, and yet she’d been smiling the whole time—just like that young boy with the astronomy book.

He’d bought the book for her on a whim, but he *had* sincerely wanted to make her smile—he’d wanted her to be happy.

“I’m glad it made you happy.”

Felix pulled Monica, whose warm body was still curled up at his stomach, a

little closer, then closed his eyes again, a feeling of calm washing over him.

* * *

Back at the church, in the little room to the side of the altar, the Starseer Witch Mary Harvey spoke to the accessory covering her right hand—Starweaving Mira.

“You’ve been a bad girl, Mira, dear.”

“Oh, oh, you’re too cruel! I only wanted to be at my beloved’s side!”

Starweaving Mira had the ability to interfere with anyone who touched it. If the person had a low degree of mana resistance, it could even control their body to an extent. But the Seven Sages were the best in the kingdom; it didn’t work on them.

Mary laughed, the sound like a ringing bell, as she removed Starweaving Mira from her hand. Then she placed it neatly in its special box and chanted the sealing spell. Once she finished the final verse, she whispered softly, “Good night, dear Mira. Sweet dreams.”

Starweaving Mira’s bitter weeping cut off the moment Mary closed the lid. She picked up the sealed box and held it to her chest as she left the church.

The lanterns decorating the streets that night were so bright, they made the stars difficult to see. Even so, Mary strained her eyes to track them.

Listening to the whispers of the constellations and safeguarding the kingdom’s future was her duty as the Starseer Witch.

Right now, she was searching for the star representing the Silent Witch. Her encounter and her decisions on this night would have a great effect on the kingdom. Each of them alone was like a tiny, twinkling star, but they were all connected, coming together to form a grand destiny.

And there’s one more thing I’m curious about..., she thought.

Next to the Silent Witch’s star shone another—one deeply intertwined with the girl’s fate. It was a precarious star shouldering a destiny of loss.

It doesn’t belong to any of the Seven Sages, and there can’t be many people that close to the Silent Witch... Whose star could it be?

As she mulled this over, she heard someone's voice from the trees. Turning, she saw a beauty in maid clothes—the Barrier Mage Louis Miller's contracted spirit, speaking to the owl sitting on her head. The owl was Mary's familiar.

"My hobby is reading," explained the spirit. "Lately, I have been reading books by Dustin Gunther. What are your hobbies, Sir Owl?"

The owl hooted. Naturally. Familiars could understand directions given to them, but they couldn't speak like people could. They weren't like spirits. She'd wondered before if a parrot might be able to talk, but she'd never seen anyone with a parrot as their familiar.

And yet Ryn was speaking to the owl anyway. *Is she having fun?* wondered Mary, puzzled as she watched them.

Eventually, Ryn noticed her there and turned to look. The way she rotated her head, without moving the rest of her body, reminded Mary of the creature still perching on Ryn.

"Are you going out, Starseer Witch?"

"No, I was just going to watch the sky from here," she replied. "But what were *you* doing, Ryn, dear?"

"I was deepening my relationship with Sir Owl."

The sensibilities of spirits were generally incomprehensible. Or could wind spirits understand the language of birds?

Ryn turned the rest of her body to face Mary. "There was something I wanted to ask you, Starseer Witch."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Why did you purposely allow Starweaving Mira to be stolen?"

Mary maintained her soft smile but didn't say anything.

Ryn continued in a monotone. "I heard the culprit used his own tools to break the lock and escape the cell he was in."

"Is that right? My, my. How disquieting."

"Why didn't you confiscate his tools?"

To Mary, it sounded like Ryn was asking these questions not to criticize, but out of pure curiosity. She stroked the box containing Starweaving Mira and replied in a singsong voice. “All is as the stars guide.”

“I see. The stars have a lot to say.”

“They do. But their voices are so soft that even I can’t make out everything,” said Mary, turning to look at the eastern sky.

Past the bell tower, a faint white was beginning to creep above the horizon. It would be morning in less than an hour. The radiance of the stars—their whispers—grew softer and softer. The night was ending, and a new day was beginning for all the living creatures of the world.

And when dawn arrived, it was time for Mary to sleep.

As she thought idly about returning to her room, she suddenly heard hurried footsteps approaching from the church’s back gate.

“I’m terribly sorry for disturbing you at this hour! Is Lady Rynzbelfeid present?! An urgent message has arrived from His Excellency Louis Miller...”



EPILOGUE

Always Put a Ribbon on Your Kitten

...It's so cold.

Monica awoke shivering. Winter was fast approaching, and the early-morning chill would penetrate even the tiniest gaps in her blanket.

She squirmed back under the covers, then realized something warm was next to her and unconsciously drew up to it. When she pressed herself against it, it warmed her right up.

It seems a little big for Nero... Hmm. Anyway, it's warm, so I guess it doesn't matter, she thought, forgetting about it and dozing off again.

Then she felt a gentle hand stroke her hair and something else squish her cheek.

Monica was very familiar with this blissful sensation. “Oh, paws... Good morning, Nero.”

“Who's Nero?”

The sound of a voice right beside her woke Monica instantly. Her eyes went as wide as saucers as she turned toward the speaker—and saw a pair of gemstone-like irises looking gently back at her.

Monica barely managed to suppress a scream and fell out of bed with a *thud*. As she got herself up on all fours, she remembered Mary's prophecy.

“You're very lucky in love right now! You might even spend a passionate night with a wonderful gentleman!”

Had she inadvertently spent a “passionate night” with a “wonderful gentleman”?

Monica pushed her forehead to the floor and groveled. “E-e-ex—”

“Ex?”

“Am I going to be...executed?” She looked like she was about to die.

Felix, sitting up in bed, chuckled to himself. His upper body was completely naked. And Monica had *rubbed her cheek* on his chest. That seemed like more than enough reason for her head to roll.

“Would you kill a cute little kitten just for wandering into your bed?”

“...Huh? A kitten?”

Monica looked up and glanced around the room, but she didn’t see any cats. *Where’s the cat that squished my cheek with its paw?* she wondered, craning her neck.

Felix watched her in amusement. “You drank some wine last night, suddenly took off your clothes, and fell asleep.”

That was when Monica finally realized she was wearing nothing but her underwear. No *wonder* she’d been so cold.

“Aren’t you cold like that?”

“Huh? Yes, sir. I’m sorry for not being properly dressed. I’ll change right a— Huh?”

Feeling a strange sensation at her neck, Monica reached up with a finger and felt a thin chain. When she looked down, she saw a small yellow-green gemstone sparkling in the morning sunlight. Confused, she looked back up at Felix.

Resting his face in his palm, his elbow propped up on a knee, he offered her a gentle smile. “It really does go with your eyes.”

“What, um, is this...?”

“You told me that if I gave you an accessory, it wouldn’t really make you happy, right?”

Monica didn’t try to hide her guilt. She nodded, troubled.

Felix smiled a little sadly at her honest response. “If you think it’s too soon to be sporting such a fancy necklace, then you can save it until you’ve become an advanced practitioner of fashion.”

Monica’s gaze lowered to the necklace again. The olive-green stone,

somewhat larger than her little finger, swayed to and fro on its slender golden chain. She could catch a bit of gold in the bright green color. It was probably a peridot. Its design was modest but pretty. He'd probably chosen it to go along with her personality.

Monica looked up at Felix, flustered. "Um, but you've already paid for the room and the book. I couldn't possibly..."

She would feel far too guilty having him do any more for her at this point. She reached for the clasp at the back of her neck to undo the pendant, but unused to such things, she wasn't sure how to unhook it.

As her fingers fumbled with the clasp, Felix got down from the bed and put his own hand over hers to guide it. But the moment he touched her, her entire body went stiff.

Monica had grown up seeing the pictures in her father's personal medical books and his anatomical models. Seeing someone else without clothes on, or being seen without clothes on, didn't matter at all to her.

But people touching her *terrified* her. She would always remember the abuse she'd suffered at the hands of her uncle after her father had passed, and her body would lock up. She trembled—and this time it wasn't because of the cold.

Felix lowered Monica's hand before it could unclasp the pendant, then asked, "May I be honest with you for a moment?"

"...?"

Felix peered into her face. His beautiful blue eyes reflected her troubled expression. "When I found you in town," he explained, "I thought you were an assassin after my life."

Monica felt the blood drain from her body.

The prince brought her pale, shivering hand up to his neck, then applied a little pressure to it. It looked almost like she was strangling him—like his own hand was trying to make her do so.

That thought absolutely horrified her.

"If I sneak off and fool around without any guards present, that makes me a

ripe target for assassination, doesn't it?"

"I—I wasn't—I wasn't trying to...", denied Monica immediately.

"Yeah, I know," replied Felix, nodding. He let go of her hand. "You're no assassin. If you were going to kill me, you'd have done so long ago."

"....."

"You don't seem like an enemy, but you're too unreliable to be an ally. In lieu of either, I've decided to think of you as an amusing pet."

"A-a pet?! A pettt...?!" Monica wailed, taken aback.

Felix winked at her. "For now, we're still fellow delinquents out for a secret night on the town."

"But a pet... A pettt..."

"I stopped calling you a little squirrel, didn't I?"

"Y-you just did it again yesterday!"

"Did I?"

"Yes! You did!"

Monica's uncharacteristically firm insistence earned her a teasing laugh from the prince. *That's not fair*, she thought, feeling like he was using laughter to dodge the issue.

"By the way, did you not realize," continued Felix, "that you could have forced me to make a deal with you? You could have told me to do whatever you said in exchange for keeping my outing a secret."

"But that's... There's nothing I need you to do for me."

She'd wanted him to stop calling her "little squirrel" as a reward for winning their game of chess, sure. But if she gave up on being called by her name and just accepted it, there would be nothing else she wanted from him.

"There's nothing I want you to give me or do for me. Nothing... I'm serious." Troubled, she fingered the pendant at her neck.

Felix nodded, his eyebrows drooping slightly. "I know. Spending the last few

months with you has taught me that. You don't expect anything from me... which is easier on me but also a little lonely."

His finger traced the chain adorning Monica's neck. His white hand—normally packed away in a glove—was slender, the type suited to playing musical instruments. But his joints were sturdy and strong; it was a man's hand.

"I didn't give this pendant to you for your sake. I did it to satisfy myself... This gift is for *me*."

Monica was at a loss; she didn't understand what he was trying to say.

Felix laughed—a little self-deprecating—and plucked up the peridot, giving it a light tug. The thin chain dug slightly into Monica's skin. "Gifts you can see—especially things a person wears on their body—are particularly good for securing someone's heart, don't you think?"

Using material goods to secure someone's heart—these were truly the words of a haughty noble. But then why was he making such a sad face?

Felix's pretty fingertips lifted the peridot. Then his well-shaped lips kissed the olive-green gem that so perfectly complemented Monica's eyes. "Even if everyone else forgets," he said, "I want you to always remember Ike and the time you spent with him."

Anyone watching would have thought the two of them had just slept together and, still mostly undressed, that they now stood professing their love in the morning light.

But as Monica looked down at the golden eyelashes before her, she thought, *I'll probably never go out on the town with Ike again*. That was why he'd given her so many gifts. He wanted to leave her with something to remind her of Ike.

Felix released the peridot. As it returned to Monica's pallid skin, it caught the shine of the morning sun and glowed the color of fresh grass. Just like Monica's eyes, the green deepened wherever the light shone.

"Peridots shine beautifully even in the faint light of the night," said Felix. "If you keep it close, I'll always be able to find you."

Normally, Monica would have gone pale and told him he didn't need to find

her. But she didn't want to thoughtlessly reject Ike and hurt him. So instead, she chose her next words very carefully, though her delivery was a little stiff.

"Ike?"

"Yes?"

"A lot of...unexpected things happened last night, but...I had fun."

"...Mm-hmm."

Monica would probably never have worn this pendant of her own accord. But for now, at least, she stopped fumbling with the clasp. She felt like removing it would make him sad.

Slowly, she stood up and reached for her folded clothes on the sofa. She was oddly happy to find her book had been placed far away from the food and drink, right on top of her clothes.

As she was changing, Felix spoke up, as if he'd suddenly remembered something. Looking at her back, he said, "You know, I've been wondering since yesterday how you got those old wounds on your back."

"Are they still there?"

"Somewhat, yes. Mostly near your shoulders."

There happened to be a large mirror in the room, so she twisted a little to look at her own back. He was right. She could see areas where her skin was pulled tight and a few places where it was raised. All scars from her uncle's abuse.

"Are they from House Kerbeck?"

Monica quickly shook her head. She was pretending to be an unwanted member of the Kerbeck family, but if suspicions of abuse were raised, she'd be causing a lot of trouble for Isabelle and her relatives.

"N-no, of course not! Everyone in House Kerbeck has been so, so good to me! These are, um, from before that..."

"Haven't you ever thought about getting rid of the scars?"

"Not really..." she said with complete sincerity. They didn't hurt anymore,

and having a few marks on her back wouldn't get in the way of her daily activities.

She'd never really thought of them as ugly, but apparently, Felix couldn't overlook such marks being left on a woman's body.

It was then that she finally noticed Felix's own scar on his side. His body was perfectly symmetrical, his skin amazingly smooth—and that was why the scar under his arm stood out so much.

"Ike... Then do you want to get rid of that scar under your arm?" asked Monica nervously.

Felix lowered his gaze to the wound, then smoothly shook his head. "No," he replied. "I need this one."

She didn't know what he meant by that, but she got the feeling she shouldn't pry any further, so she finished dressing in silence.

* * *

Though they left Madam Cassandra's fairly early in the morning, nearly all the women came to see them off.

Doris, who had taken particularly good care of them, gave Felix a passionate kiss on the cheek, then beckoned for Monica to come closer. She whispered in her ear, "If you're ever having trouble making ends meet, you can come here whenever you like. I'll look after you."

"Uh, thanks..."

"Also, just so you know, his weak spots are_____... Be sure to remember them."

Monica didn't feel like she'd benefit at all from remembering that kind of information. She simply nodded and smiled back vaguely.

After the women had seen them off, the pair left Madam Cassandra's shop behind and headed for where the carriages were parked. Felix asked her to come back with him, but Monica had promised to meet up with Ryn, so she politely refused.

"We do have classes today," the prince pointed out. "...Will you make it in

time?”

“Y-yes!” she replied. After all, she could just have Ryn fly her back to school. She’d get there much faster than she would with a carriage. “Um, thank you for everything!” she said with a bow, clutching to her chest the book he’d bought her.

Felix gave her a friendly, gentle smile—the same sort he always wore at school. He was no longer the mischievous Ike. This was the smile of the kingdom’s beloved royal family.

...My time with Ike is over, she thought. The person with her now was the kingdom’s second prince, Felix Arc Ridill. Someone exalted and distant.

“Then I’ll see you later,” he said.

“Okay.”

The carriage Felix had boarded began to clatter away. Monica stayed there and saw him off until she could no longer hear its wheels.

After that, she slowly began to walk toward the church. Soon, a small yellow bird fluttered down from the sky and landed on her shoulder—Ryn. Apparently, she’d spotted her from midair.

“Excellent work on guarding the second prince,” said the spirit.

“R-right...”

Privately, Monica grimaced. She wasn’t sure if what she’d done could actually be called “guarding.” After all, she’d forgotten all about her mission halfway through and started simply enjoying herself.

Even if the expensive book and the peridot pendant were mere whimsy, she’d never, ever forget about them.

As she thought about this, the little bird whispered into her ear. “I’d prefer to bring you straight back to Serendia Academy, my lady, but I have a piece of bad news to deliver first.”

“...What?” asked Monica, freezing.

Ryn continued quietly. “It is in regards to the one who infiltrated the chess

competition under the guise of Eugene Pitman...”

* * *

“He’s...committed suicide via poisoning, you say?” Louis asked in a low voice.

The head prison guard sitting across from him nodded once, his face pale.

Upon his return from the Starseer Witch’s mansion, the first thing Louis’s beloved wife had done was hand him a report, just delivered, with this pleasant little piece of news. The false Pitman who had infiltrated Serendia Academy had committed suicide using some poison he’d had hidden on his person.

Thus, Louis hadn’t been home for more than a few minutes before he’d had to use a flight spell to reach the prison where the man had been held. When he’d arrived, the guard he’d met had the gall to tell him to come back in the morning. He’d only had to be a *little* rough with the man before he was able to speak to the one in charge.

According to the head guard, by the time the man on patrol that afternoon noticed anything strange, the prisoner was already dead.

There are two possibilities, thought Louis. Either the man they’d put in prison had somehow smuggled in poison in order to kill himself or someone else had killed him to keep his mouth shut.

Believing the latter to be more likely, Louis checked the corpse, which they were preserving in the basement. His body had simply been laid on the floor. It was a man in his mid-twenties or so.

His face was exactly the same as Professor Eugene Pitman of Minerva’s, and he had apparently not been wearing any makeup or other disguises. That had all been checked when he was captured.

The man was now in rough prison clothes, but the state of the garments gave Louis pause.

“Sir,” he said to the head guard, “did you remove his clothes after he died?”

“No, nothing like that,” the man replied. “I believe he was like this when we found him.”

Very strange, thought Louis, frowning. The prisoner’s clothes were a mess. His

underpants were turned inside out and pulled all the way up to his waist. *It's almost like someone dressed him after he was dead.*

Just then, a thought occurred to Louis. "Have we found the real Eugene Pitman's body yet?"

The head guard shook his head.

Louis was sure now. "Then this body belongs to the real Eugene Pitman."

"I'm sorry?"

"Whoever it was, they probably stopped the corpse from rotting using ice magecraft." Louis turned a sharp glare on the head guard, who was clearly slow on the uptake, and asked one more question. "Did anyone not employed here enter or exit the prison? Any contractors, for instance?"

"Uh, now that you mention it, some people came to deliver food for the prisoners..."

"They were in cahoots with our criminal. They threw the real Pitman's body into the cell, made it look like the fake Pitman had killed himself, and facilitated the fake's escape."

* * *

Early that morning, the town of Corlapton was still basking in the afterglow of the previous day's festival, with bottles of alcohol littering the streets and drunkards passed out asleep here and there. Many others were using the morning hours to pack up their stalls, clean their storefronts, or take down lanterns.

Bartholomeus slipped through the unusually populated morning streets, careful not to draw too much attention.

He'd been arrested on suspicion of stealing Starweaving Mira the day before and locked up in a room in the ceremony venue. But he'd used some tools he'd had hidden on his person to make a clean escape.

Ugh, that was awful... They're not takin' me in for questioning, that's for damn sure!

While he would have liked to leave town immediately, there was something

keeping him here. The day before, he'd seen something, although his consciousness had been hazy. He'd felt the wind gently catch him as he fell from the night sky and witnessed the beautiful woman in maid clothes who had been manipulating it. She hadn't chanted a single word, and yet her control over the wind had been shockingly precise. Finally, she'd scooped him up and launched into the air—once again, without a chant.

Although he couldn't hear what she and the little runt in the squirrel-eared hood had said to each other, he'd been able to make out two words in particular.

Silent Witch.

So that drop-dead-gorgeous maid was the Silent Witch!

As Bartholomeus recalled the beautiful face of the maid as she carried him across her arms, his cheeks flushed, and his hand clutched at his chest. He gazed up into the morning light.

“Wah-ha. Well, this is a problem. My heart won't stop fluttering... She really got me, eh...”

Now that he was wanted for stealing an ancient magic item, he'd like to get out of the country as soon as possible—but at the same time, he now had a reason to stay. What kind of man would he be if he didn't try to court the woman he'd fallen head over heels for?

And now, to think of a strategy... As he set about planning how he would get close to the Silent Witch, a pair of young people—a man and a woman—approached him from ahead, coming to a halt right in front of him.

Bartholomeus immediately moved to turn around, thinking they were pursuers come to arrest him, but then the young woman called out to him.

“You're the jack-of-all-trades Bartholomeus, yes? We have a job request for you.”

“What now?” he asked, stopping and taking another look at the two of them.

The woman appeared to be in her late teens, with black hair cut neatly at chin level, sharp eyes, and dignified eyebrows. As for the man, he was probably in

his twenties, with short brown hair. He had an average face, the kind you'd find all over the streets and probably wouldn't remember.

Both of them wore commonplace traveling clothes. They looked for all the world like just a couple of sightseers come to take part in the previous day's festivities, but Bartholomeus's gut told him they were not respectable people.

"Sorry, but I'm all booked up for the time bein'," he replied, shaking a hand at them. "You'll have to take your business elsewhere."

The woman took a few quiet steps toward him, then whispered something—but not in the language of Ridill. No, these were the words of his homeland—of the Empire.

"Bartholomeus Baal, apprentice to a well-known craftsman of magic items. I hear he used violence against his master and was driven from his homeland."

"...?!" Bartholomeus went pale.

The woman with the dignified eyebrows took another step, further closing the distance. Bartholomeus retreated but soon found himself driven into a narrow alleyway.

Eventually, his back came up against a wall, and the woman finally stopped. She took a piece of paper out of her pocket and thrust it in his face.

"There's something we'd urgently like you to make."

A certain school uniform had been drawn on the paper. It included not only the basic outfit but all the details, down to the shoes and accessories. And when Bartholomeus saw the design of the decorative pin, his eyes widened.

It was the crosier and the crown of lilies that symbolized Serendine, the Goddess of Light. Only one school used that as its seal.

"Hey, this is a Serendia Academy uniform!" exclaimed Bartholomeus. "What the hell are you two tryin' to pull here?"

"We cannot answer that question. You need only make what is requested."

You've got to be kidding me, thought Bartholomeus, privately cursing them. He'd *just* gotten into trouble over a job involving Serendia Academy. *And if they're coming to me instead of a tailor, they ain't usin' this for anything good...*

While it was no business of his how the things he created were used, getting mixed up with Serendia Academy could only spell trouble. *Big* trouble.

After considerable hesitation, he assumed a careless smile and adjusted his voice to sound particularly unreliable. “Come on—this is a huge job. I’d never be able to pull it off. I’m just a wannabe craftsman, you know. I ain’t an expert at makin’ clothes. ‘Specially not all these intricate shoes and accessories and whatnot.”

“We heard that in the past, you were highly praised both for your skill in a great number of fields and for how quickly you worked,” said the woman, thrusting a leather pouch at Bartholomeus, who had fallen silent.

The large silver coins peeking out of the heavy bag caused him to swallow despite himself.

“This is your advance payment,” said the woman.

“This is just the advance...?!”

The next thing he knew, the pouch was in his hands.

If he was going to stay here in Ridill and court the Silent Witch, he’d need as much money as he could get. Financing a good woman was expensive.

And with this much, I could buy her all the flowers and dresses and presents she wants! Wait for me, Silent Witch! I’m coming! he thought with a dopey look on his face, recalling the beauty in the maid outfit.

As the two watched Bartholomeus saunter off in good spirits, one of them—the man with the plain face—laughed, his throat vibrating pleasantly as his face distorted in a strange, unnatural way.

“Oh dear, dear me,” he said. “My face still hasn’t stabilized, hmm? I do so hate how the skin tends to collapse after dragonshifting.”

The man massaged his warped face, his voice smooth and sweet as honey. His skin twisted and writhed until it settled down along his cheekbones.

“And I must say,” he continued, “you found *such* a convenient man for the job, Heidi. And you even helped me break free from that awful prison. I’m so lucky to have such a talented partner.”

“That’s very kind of you to say, Ewan.”

The girl with the dignified eyebrows—Heidi—spoke stiffly, but her expression had softened just a bit. She was Ewan’s partner and apprentice. Ewan was teaching her everything she needed to know about how to be a spy, including combat techniques, and Heidi had helped him break out after he was arrested for infiltrating Serendia Academy.

“Now then,” said Ewan, “let’s get back to our preparations. I had some difficulties last time, but I have a good recollection of the academy’s layout. I also know how to get close to the second prince...and that he has a very talented individual guarding him.”

“Are you referring to the mage who defeated your dragonshifted form with a single attack?”

“Mm-hmm.” Ewan narrowed his eyes, thinking back to his defeat.

Bernie Jones, a student from Minerva’s, had noticed his disguise, and as Ewan was trying to silence him, a female student had arrived. Not wanting her to scream, Ewan had encased her in a spherical water barrier, but somehow, the barrier had broken. She’d then attacked his weak spot—between the eyes—and he’d passed out. The next thing he knew, he had been in a prison cell.

As he went over everything again, he came to a single conclusion.

That girl who was ridiculously good at chess...Monica Norton. There’s something about her. If they intended to infiltrate the Serendia Academy school festival, she would likely be their most difficult obstacle. The thought made Ewan shudder—and smile, his lips forming a crescent. Tilting his throat back, he laughed in that sweet voice, his heart filled with joy.

“Heh-heh. Ah-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“You seem to be having fun, Ewan.”

“Oh, I am. My heart’s positively aflutter. After all...I can just *taste* the juicy secrets we’ll uncover.”

Ewan, grinning, licked his lips like a cat bearing down on its prey. As he did, the skin of his face pulled back and changed again, almost like it was made of

clay.

“My job is to reveal secrets—and that goes for both Felix Arc Ridill and Monica Norton. I’ll lay them all bare.”

* * *

Thanks to Ryn’s high-speed flight, Monica was now back in her attic room in the Serendia girls’ dormitory. There, she found her familiar, Nero, tucked away in the small gap underneath the bed—with his rear end toward her, no less.

“...U-um, Nero?”

Instead of an answer, his black tail slapped on the floor.

Oh, he’s sulking. “Come on, Nero...,” she said, troubled.

Once again, Nero smacked his tail against the floor. “Not only did you leave me here to go out on a nighttime adventure, but you didn’t come back until morning!”

“Ummm...”

As Monica struggled for an explanation, Ryn—who had just delivered her and was now back in maid form—spoke up.

“Yes,” she said. “After being waited upon by handsome young men and enjoying a feast of debauchery, the Silent Witch spent the night at a brothel with an attractive boy.”

“Miss Ryyynnn?!” wailed Monica, her eyes going wide at the lurid description. *He’ll misunderstand!*

Nero jumped out from under the bed and whacked her on the shin with his front leg. “I thought better of you! I had no idea you had such loose morals!”

“Loose morals?!”

“And you’re insensitive! You could learn a thing or two from Abram!”

“Who is Abram?!” she cried.

Huffing and puffing, Nero dragged a book out from under the blanket. It was his favorite adventure novel, written by a man named Dustin Gunther. Her familiar was always going on about how amazing the author was.

He deftly used his front leg to turn the pages until he got to the cast of characters, then smacked a name with his paw. “Abram is the friend of the main character, Bartholomew, and he’s got this superstrong sense of obligation. Even when a gorgeous woman tries to seduce him, he pushes her away, saying, ‘To me, friendship is a greater treasure than love,’ and maintains his bond with Bartholomew!”

“Abram... Bartholomew...?”

Monica had never read the novel, but she got the feeling she’d heard those names before. Relatively recently, in fact.

“This is The Adventures of Bartholomew Alexander. Good book, eh? And I love the main character’s name.”

“I’m in the middle of writing a scene in my new novel about a foolish man who falls in love with a theater actress. Abram, the main character’s friend, is head over heels for the actress Catherine, and at every opportunity, he says, ‘I want to see her perform in person just one more time.’ You sound exactly like him right now.”

The play at the festival and the novel the shopkeeper at Porter Used Books had been writing—that had all been part of Nero’s favorite book series.

Wait, could my father’s friend...? Could Mr. Porter really be the novelist Dustin Gunther?

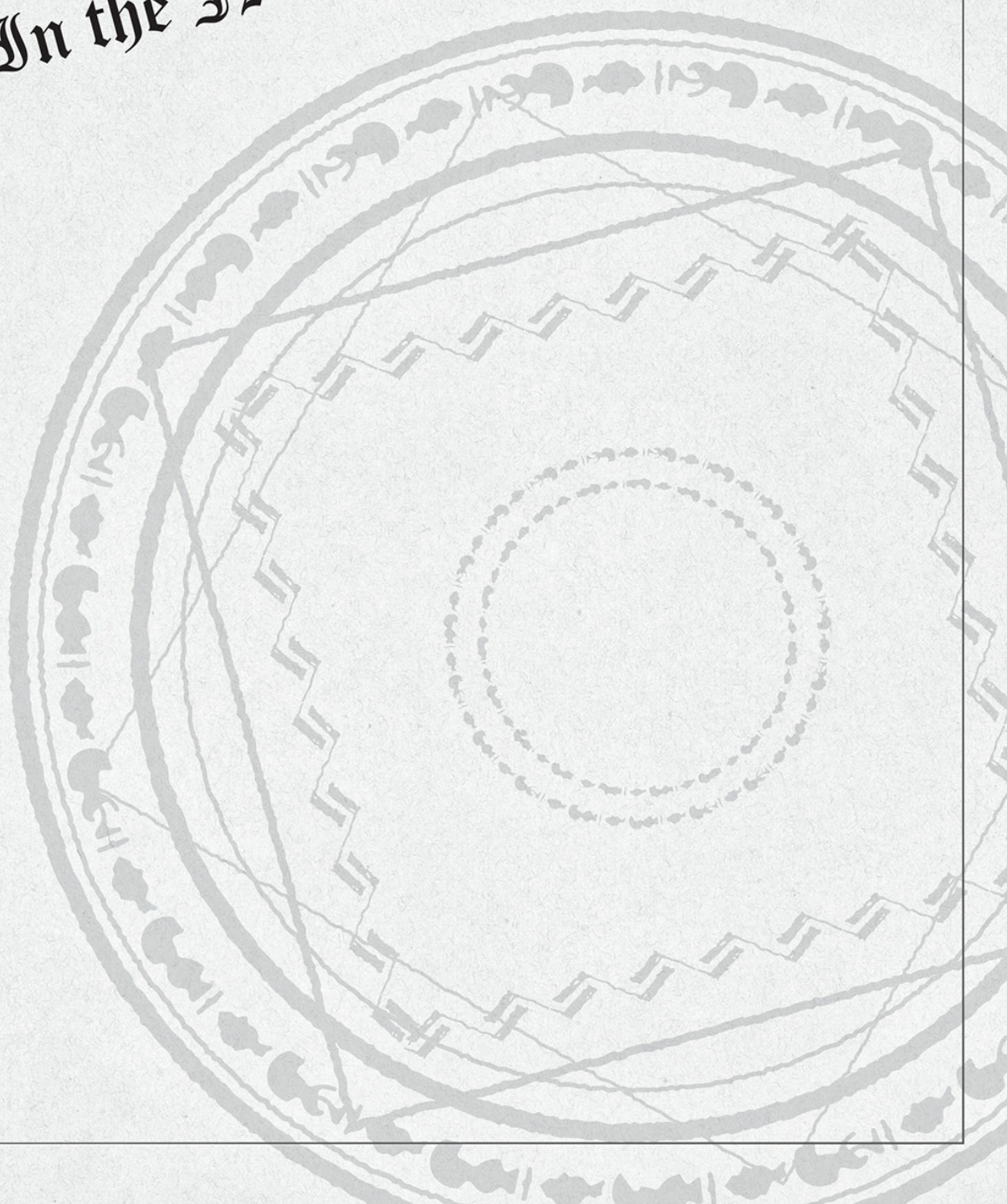
As she stood there in blank amazement, Nero went on about how devoted Abram was to duty and morality. For the sake of her familiar, she decided to keep quiet about this Abram character falling madly in love with a theater actress.

In the meantime, she unlocked her desk drawer. Inside it were her father’s coffeepot—a memento—as well as the letters Lana had given her and the comb she and Lana had bought together. Monica took the book and peridot pendant she’d brought back and placed them inside.

It was a lot of fun going out on the town with you, Ike.

Her mind swimming with memories of her nighttime companion, Monica softly closed the drawer.

SECRET EPISODE
In the North



Upon transferring carriages and arriving near the Velange Mountains in the north of Ridill, Louis used flight magecraft to lift into the air. His destination lay in these mountains.

Had Ryn been present, he could have flown the whole way. Unfortunately, he was currently lending her out to the Silent Witch, so he'd been forced to take carriages instead.

Louis was especially skilled at controlling flight magecraft, but the spell still guzzled mana, so he couldn't use it to move over long distances. He'd decided it was best to save it for the mountain roads too rough for carriages.

As he straddled his staff and flew through the air, his braided hair fluttering in the wind, he looked down at the scenery sprawling below him. Snowfall mottled the Velange Mountains. Back in the capital, they had only the cold wind to deal with; here, though, the snow had already begun to fall.

Maintaining his flight spell, Louis erected a barrier to keep out the cold. Keeping both a flight spell and a barrier up at the same time cost a lot of mana, but Louis didn't hesitate. He wasn't particularly sensitive to the cold, but he still hated it.

Eventually, he came within sight of an old, run-down monastery on a leveled-off area in the mountains. That was his destination: Richawood Monastery. Most of the people who ended up here, so far from the capital, were women with backstories. Some were abused by their husbands, others driven out during political schemes, and yet others had circumstances they couldn't tell anyone—Louis was here for one of the latter.

In front of the monastery was a single young sister gripping a shovel, digging at the snow. Louis hesitated over whether to land a short distance away and walk up to her. Not many people could use flight magecraft, and some would be very shocked by it.



After mulling it over for a few moments, he decided it was too much trouble and simply landed in front of her. He put one hand on the staff he was using as a seat, then quietly touched down on the earth, toes first. As he did, snowy dust sprang up around him.

The sister shoveling snow said, “Oh,” not seeming particularly surprised. When Louis saw the girl’s face, he realized why.

“I was just thinking what a plucky sister you were, to not be shocked by flight magecraft, when I noticed it was you.”

“Well, this was far less intimidating than when you spun at full-speed straight toward the ground, at least,” said the sister, sticking the shovel vertically into the snow.

This was Count Bright’s daughter, Casey Grove.

* * *

The abbess, an elderly sister, ordered Casey to bring Louis to the reception room, then retreated into the chapel, evidently not wanting to have anything to do with him. To these women, living so far from the secular world, any outsiders coming to visit—especially men like Louis—were generally unwanted.

Casey seemed to be no exception, and after showing him to the reception room, she got right down to business without even putting on any tea.

“What do you want from me?” she asked curtly. “I’m pretty sure I’ve told you basically everything I can.”

Louis responded with a smile. He was brimming with the confidence of an adult speaking to a child. “There’s something new I’d like to ask you about.”

“Nobody else from my home played a part in the assassination attempt. It was only my father and me.”

“I know that’s what you believe, at least.”

The implication caused Casey’s lips to twitch. Louis brought out something covered in cloth, then set it on the table and gently unwrapped it. Inside were fragments of red gemstones, big and small.

“Do you know what these are?” he asked her.

“...Pieces of the Spiralflame I used, right?”

Instead of giving her a yes, Louis simply smiled before continuing. “Your father insists he purchased this from a traveling merchant. But I believe someone from the Kingdom of Landor gave it to him.”

“Are you saying people from Landor incited him?”

“Do you know how much a Spiralflame costs? Forgive my rudeness, but they’re not something Count Bright—who is far from wealthy—could afford.”

There were plenty of other, cheaper methods to stage an assassination. Why had the count picked a Spiralflame? It seemed safe to assume someone had given it to him and encouraged him to act.

Casey must have considered that possibility, if only vaguely. She bit her lip, her expression stern. She was desperately trying to conceal how disturbed she was, so as not to make any remarks that might further disadvantage her father.

It was commendable. Louis watched her, then picked up one of the red shards and held it up to the light. “The gemstone used in this Spiralflame is an extremely pure ruby. I had an expert appraise it, and they told me it was without a doubt something mined from Glocken.”

“Glocken?”

“You don’t know of it? It’s a mine in the southeastern part of the Empire. It doesn’t produce very much, but they do mine rubies of an ideal quality to use in magic items.” He paused. “Of course, the Empire exports almost none of what they pull from the mine, so it’s extremely difficult to buy one on the market.”

Louis returned the red shard to the table with a *click*. The sound echoed awfully loudly in the serene abbey.

Behind his monocle, he narrowed his eyes, setting his gaze on Casey. “The Spiralflame that Count Bright gave to you was made in the Empire. Do you know what that means?”

Casey immediately paled. She was clever. Those few words had been all she’d needed to arrive at a very disturbing possibility.

If they assumed someone from Landor had given Count Bright the

Spiralflame, then the next question would be where that person had gotten their hands on a Spiralflame from the Empire. This gave rise to a single hypothesis.

“It’s possible the Kingdom of Landor and the Empire are in a secret alliance.”

The report of a spy infiltrating the chess competition and using body-manipulation magecraft had only reinforced Louis’s concerns. Any magecraft that directly interfered with the human body, such as altering it, strengthening it, or healing wounds, was forbidden in the Kingdom of Ridill due to the risk of severe mana poisoning.

There was just one nation in the world that allowed such magecraft: Ridill’s next-door neighbor, the Schwargald Empire.

The infiltrator had cast spells that only those from the Empire used. The Spiralflame employed in the previous assassination attempt had been made in the Empire. There was, then, a fairly high probability these two incidents were linked.

If Louis’s guess was correct, Ridill could end up in a war with the Empire and the Kingdom of Landor.

Casey seemed keenly aware of that, too. She balled her hands into fists on her lap, looked down, and said, “I’ve personally never seen anyone who appeared to be from the Empire entering or leaving my home. The only ones coming or going were Landorian nobles even I knew the names of.”

“Then you’ve never witnessed your father sending letters to the Empire?”

“No.”

“I see.”

Louis would have been happy to get testimony strengthening the imperial link, but it seemed things wouldn’t be so easy.

If the Empire and Landor were connected, it was clear the Empire, with its incomparable national power, would be the dominating force. It was possible the lowest Landorian nobles weren’t even aware of their own link to the Empire. There were still many what-ifs to consider, but it seemed they couldn’t

afford to let their guard down.

“It doesn’t appear like you have any more information for me. And, seeing as you haven’t even offered any tea, I shall be on my way immediately.”

As Louis rose from his chair, Casey stopped him.

“Wait.”

He cast her an uninterested glance. He was busy, and he hated wasting time. Especially since this girl had no more to offer him.

“Is Monica doing well?”

And, not surprisingly, she broached a topic Louis didn’t care about at all. “How pointless. You’d have been better off asking about the weather. She apparently fought off yet another assassin recently, but she’s doing quite well.”

Casey sucked in her breath. “To be honest, I still can’t believe it,” she said. “Monica, one of the Seven Sages... She seemed like such a normal girl.”

“A normal girl? The Silent Witch?”

Louis couldn’t help but laugh. Even after seeing Monica use uncharmed magecraft, Casey didn’t understand her. He sat himself back down and offered her a scornful smile—both beautiful and cruel.

“Did you hear of the incident six months ago involving the Black Dragon of Worgan?” he asked.

“Yes. It appeared in the Worgan Mountains in Kerbeck, and the Silent Witch—well, Monica drove it off, right?”

Kerbeck was close to Casey’s homeland, so the situation must have affected her as well. Black dragons struck despair into the hearts of the people. The blackflames they spewed were flames of anathema, capable of incinerating even the most powerful defensive barriers. Killing one wouldn’t have been easy even for Louis, who was skilled in dragon slaying.

“Well, I’m the one who had to drag her there to kill the thing,” he explained. “She was wailing and crying about how scared she was, snot flying everywhere.”

Casey looked at him, appalled at the ready confession of his cruelty. “That’s *normal*,” she said. “Anyone would be terrified of a black dragon.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? Yes, even I was somewhat fearful at the prospect. But what do you think Monica Everett was truly afraid of?”

Louis looked down, reflecting on the day he’d brought Monica to slay the dragon—and the words she’d spoken to him through her sobs and whimpers.

“‘I’m scared of the Dragon Knights. I don’t want to be around so many people I don’t know,’ she said... That girl wasn’t afraid of the black dragon in the slightest. No, what she—one of the Seven Sages—feared most were the Dragon Knights who had come along for the hunt. She was more afraid of the *people*.”

* * *

Upon meeting up with the Dragon Knights dispatched to hunt the Black Dragon of Worgan, Monica had looked like she was about to vomit. In fact, she apparently *had*, several times, in private.

She’d been more than just pale—she’d looked like a ghost. Her round eyes had been sunken, frantically darting this way and that, though they were hidden behind the hood pulled low over her face. Whenever she spotted a person, a high-pitched whimper would squeeze out from her throat, and she’d begin to wander around in search of somewhere to hide.

She’d always been scared of other people, but it was apparently much worse when it came to tall men with loud voices—the exact type of people comprising the Dragon Knights. She’d probably never felt more afraid in her life.

Ultimately, while they were waiting to commence the mission, she’d curled up behind a tree and begun muttering numbers to herself.

Louis had been privately concerned she might faint when she had to attend the war council. Fortunately, though, she stayed still through it—like an inanimate object. It was excellent work for Monica and far better than her shrieking or passing out.

Louis had gone to talk to her after the meeting ended. “My fellow Sage, regarding the council...”

Monica didn’t exactly care for Louis, but he was the only person there she

knew, so she could at least have a conversation with him. He understood that and took sharing information with her as his personal duty.

“I’ve drawn up a list of Dragon Knights who will be accompanying you into the Worgan Mountains. I’d like you to memorize it, and—”

“I don’t...need it,” said Monica, looking at the list he was holding out with a vacant, impassive look on her face.

Rather irked at her monotone, Louis offered her a wry grin, trying to ease her anxieties. “Oh? Have you already memorized them, despite all that flailing around?”

“...Yes. It was...easy.”

Louis would never forget the look on Monica’s face as she spoke. It was like she’d tried to smile but failed, constructing an awful, twisted grin instead. Her cheeks were drawn back in terror—and yet something in her round, youthful eyes was *entranced*.

“It’s easy to remember people if you think of them as numbers. And they, um, become less scary, too...”

Louis was at a total loss for words.

Monica wasn’t even seeing *people* right now. She was only seeing numbers. Did she see *him* as numbers, too?

“Please give a message to eight nine one eight seven two seven one five eight...or, um, the commander.” He couldn’t believe it as she called the leader of the Dragon Knights by a string of numbers before declaring, “I will enter the Worgan Mountains alone. I don’t...need any support.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It will...be over quickly.”

True to her word, the Silent Witch Monica Everett entered the Worgan Mountains on her own and killed the black dragon. She even shot down every one of the pterodragons swarming around their former master, ending the operation in but a few moments.

“Reducing people to numbers keeps them from scaring her. Have you ever heard such an absurd idea?”

As Louis told his story, smiling sardonically, Casey pursed her lips and fell silent. He looked at her with pity.

“The girl is terrified of other people from the bottom of her heart,” he said. “That gives her the ability to be as merciless as required. She’s a far more twisted, unfeeling witch than you give her credit for.”

And that was why he’d chosen her to be his coconspirator in guarding the second prince.

“You’d do well not to expect any actual emotion or feelings from her,” he concluded with a sneer.

Casey violently stood up. Her chair clattered to the floor behind her. She then stomped out of the room before quickly returning with a teacup and a small wrapped object in her hands.

She set the teacup down roughly in front of Louis, then thrust the paper wrapping at him. “I wasn’t sure whether to give this to her or not, but after hearing all that, I’ve made up my mind. Give this to Monica. You don’t need to tell her it’s from me.”

After asking to look inside, Louis unwrapped the paper slightly. Then his eyes went wide.

Casey glared at him sharply. She must have been unable to suppress her rage at Louis’s words.

It would be so much easier if she simply hated the Silent Witch. But the girl was foolish and soft at heart.

Louis sighed to himself, then tucked the item away in his pocket. Finally, he took an elegant sip of tea from the cup and said, “I suppose I can do you a little favor in exchange for the tea. You wouldn’t happen to have any sugar or jam, would you?”



Characters So Far

Characters



Monica Everett

The Silent Witch, one of the Seven Sages. She's finally made her nightlife debut and acquired the title of delinquent. Her former surname was Reyn; she took the name Everett from her foster mother.



Louis Miller

The Barrier Mage, one of the Seven Sages. Said, "I'm a newlywed and only have eyes for my wife," to Starweaving Mira about a hundred times. A hard worker who just wants to go home as soon as possible to spend some quality time with his wife.



Nero

Monica's familiar. Worked hard on his fancy outfit, basing it on illustrations from a novel. He tried his best, but ended up leaving out the lining. They were so flimsy, he quickly changed back to his well-loved, usual robe.



Rynzbelfeid

A high wind spirit contracted to Louis. Extremely satisfied at having been able to put her "don't lay a hand on my woman" and "princess carry" plans to the test. Next she wants to try that one move where she pins someone against a wall.



Mary Harvey

The Starseer Witch, one of the Seven Sages and the foremost prophet in the Kingdom of Ridill.

A beauty of unknown age boasting the longest term in the Seven Sages among its current members. Her secret to maintaining her youth is to lavish her affection on whatever she fancies without reserve.



Felix Arc Ridill

The second prince of the Kingdom of Ridill and student council president at Serendia Academy.

A huge fan of the Silent Witch, he sneaks out of the dorms at night frequently to have fun in town, where he collects the Silent Witch's essays.



Cyril Ashley

The foster son of Marquess Highown. Vice president of the student council. Secretly bothered by his lean frame and how he can't put on any muscle. Was extremely surprised when he lent Monica his jacket because of how baggy it was on her.

Characters



Elliott Howard

The son of Count Dasvy and a secretary on the student council. Was very fixated on social status, but his ideas are slowly shifting. Has been friends with Benjamin since they were young. They taught each other chess and violin.



Neil Clay Maywood

The son of Baron Maywood and the student council's officer of general affairs. Having been trained by his father from a young age, he's very good at all types of board games. Everyone is wondering why he didn't take chess class again this year.



Bridget Greyham

The daughter of Marquess Shaleberry and a secretary on the student council. Considered to be one of the top-three most beautiful girls at the academy.

Her handwriting is gorgeous, and everyone who receives one of her invitations breaks out into a smile.



Lana Colette

The daughter of Baron Colette and Monica's friend. Has a bone to pick with rotten-mouthed, glasses-wearing boys; if he's wearing glasses, she's about thirty percent more scathing with her comments.



Isabelle Norton

The daughter of Count Kerbeck and Monica's coconspirator on her mission. Wanted to go cheer her on during the chess competition but had to restrain herself, since the villainess who bullies her can't be seen cheering instead. Was so frustrated about it, she cried.



Claudia Ashley

The daughter of Marquess Highown, Cyril's foster sister, and Neil's fiancée. Her chess skills are quite good, and a certain musician has described them thusly: "Ahhh... Her chess is like a requiem for the world as it falls into ruin."



Glenn Dudley

A second-year student in Serendia Academy's advanced course and the son of a butcher.

At the age where he dreams of saying, "Checkmate!" one day and sounding super cool. Managed to learn the names of the pieces thanks to some patient tutoring from Neil and Cyril but forgot the rest.



Benjamin Mording

A third-year student in Serendia Academy's advanced course.

The son of a court musician, he has already composed several pieces of his own. His whole family has a flair for the dramatic—and for excessive spending. Both his mood and the contents of his wallet wane and wax with incredible speed.

Characters



Casey Grove

The daughter of Count Bright. Currently living in a convent deep in the mountains, where she shovels snow, plows fields, and bakes bread, contributing much to the quality of life there.



Bernie Jones

The son of Count Ambard and a student at Minerva's Mage Training Institution. Beaten soundly by Monica's genius-level talent, he harbors a dark, warped attachment to her.

His glasses are a little big for his face, a feature he believes makes him more intimidating.

Afterword



Thank you for purchasing *Secrets of the Silent Witch*, Volume 3.

Something I've been thinking about since working on Volume 1 of the print version is that I want to have Monica take on some sort of new challenge that wasn't included in the version published on the web.

That came to fruition here in Volume 3.

There were quite a few more shrieks and yelps from Monica this time around, but I hope you'll continue to watch her challenge herself and grow.

To Nanna Fujimi, thank you once again for all the wonderful illustrations. As always, they were elaborate and beautiful, and they packed such a punch, it left me gasping. They really convey the atmosphere of the world in the story, and for that, I'm truly grateful.

To Tobi Tana, thank you for always doing such an excellent job on the manga adaptation. All your character expressions and poses are just so *them*. I couldn't be happier.

And last but not least, I sincerely want to thank everyone who purchased this book.

The school festival will finally begin in Volume 4. Please look forward to what battles await Monica there.

Matsuri Isora

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